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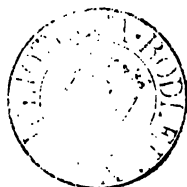
BY ANNIE THOMAS,

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"WALTER GORING," "NO ALTERNATIVE."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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CHAPTER I.

NEW FRIENDS!

I FORGIVE Aunt Helen a good many of her sins against me the morning after she has made her sad disclosure to me concerning Theo, for the look of unhappiness on her face has intensified itself into one of stolid despair. I have never realized till now that any one with such a consistently good appetite and lethargic temperament as are the portions of Aunt Helen can be oppressed by any mental pain, or be the repository of such a secret as this which she is guarding. But, for all my pity for

Torrens," Claire says bitterly. "I can't blind myself—he's been in a state of almost boisterous elation ever since he heard you were going to stay with her in Green Street. I know what he will do; he will make you his cat's-paw. You will be his excuse for going to her house and being her companion, and you're such a blind bat that she'll win him before your eyes, and you won't see it."

"I shall not see it, because she won't do it," I say confidently.

"Nonsense! She's only a woman, and she loves him. Why should she make a sacrifice for me any more than I would for her? What forces she can bring to bear upon him—beauty, money, position, breeding! You see I do her justice. She *will* turn his head. She has knowledge of the world—she has tact. If a Venus endowed with the wealth of Croesus had entered the lists against me, and there had been the tiniest taint of vulgarity about her, I could have put it before him in a light that would have

disgusted him. But she can defy my criticism at all points—I can only hate her.”

“Perhaps he will change his mind before my visit to Mr. Macpherson is over,” I say reassuringly. I find myself drifting rapidly into the confirmed habit of buoying myself up with the hope that something will turn up to obviate impending unpleasantness.

“At any rate, discourage his visits, and let Lady Torrens see that you disapprove of them,” Claire goes on, disregarding my suggestion, which, I admit to myself, has but little sinew and strength in it. “Think of me, Tim, down here, while he’s disporting up there. I’m getting suspicious and soured, for I love him more than ever; and if I lose him, I shall marry in despair, and go to the dogs as fast I can. So think well before you fall in quietly with any one’s plans to separate us.”

I give a solemn promise that I will do anything or nothing, as the case may be; and, after the final leave-taking, I go off weighted with so many contradictory

pledges to Claire and my conscience that I feel quite old and world-worn, and heartily tired of everything. Theo is the last to say good-bye, and as he comes down the steps to the carriage, he looks so grave, so thoughtful, such a gallant young prince under a cloud, that all feeling for everybody else is merged in one of passionate compassion for him. But he rather shatters this sentiment when he says—

“Shake off the Macpherson’s relict as soon as you can, Tim, for I shall be up very soon, and mine shall be the pleasant task to show you the ‘wonders of our great metropolis.’ We’ll not make spectacles of ourselves by taking the Murray and Macpherson in tow, will we?”

“I shall be more sorry than I can say to see you come near them,” I say coldly. “I should be afraid the whole time that you would forget what is due to them, and to yourself as a gentleman.”

“Ah, well,” he says, carelessly leaning in at the carriage window, while Claire

watches him anxiously from the hall-door, "perhaps I had better wait to commence my fraternal duties till you're with Lady Torrens. Say you'll be glad to see me then, Tim. Won't you?—won't you, dear?"

He utters the last words in his own peculiar coaxing whisper, seeming to fondle the syllables with his lips as he speaks them. I can't help being thrilled by the thrilling tones. I can't help looking back into the depths of the eyes that, half veiled by their lashes, look so absorbingly into mine. I see a half smile flicker over his face, and I feel that it is one of triumph at the ease with which he can gain a victory over me whenever he pleases. Stung by this, I exclaim—


"You can't possibly come to Lady Torrens' house unless she invites you, Theo. I won't be your excuse for coming to see her when she doesn't want you."

He merely laughs in reply, draws back from the carriage, and as I drive off without

further let or hindrance, I see him run back to Claire and draw her hand within his arm. How many women can this versatile genius make love to simultaneously, I wonder?

I let romance reign over me during the first portion of my journey; that is to say, I allow my thoughts to dwell wholly on Theo, without snapping them off or rudely crushing them, as I have felt it to be my duty to do lately. But as I near the terminus I feel that I had better banish romance, for I shall have to face the reality of Mr. Murray's presence at the station, where he has promised to meet me.

I am neither astonished nor annoyed when I get out at my journey's end and look up and down the platform in vain for Mr. Murray. I understand at once that probably he is talking to some one who listens to him suggestively, answering and interesting himself, and that I have slipped out of his memory for the time being. When he calls me to mind he will be sorry for the omission, which savours slightly



of neglect, and I shall accept his apologies with the toleration and gentleness which is born of perfect indifference and—— What is this?

I am disturbed in my musings by the sudden apparition close in front of me of a little stout woman with a round, rosy face, which seems to grow rounder and rosier as I look at it, under the influence of a smile. For an instant I fancy the smile must be for me, but I am quickly undeceived. It is an unconscious expression of the genial interest she is taking in all things that have life upon the platform, from the first-class passengers down to a crateful of cackling hens, all fuss and feathers, who are nearly maddening me. Finding that she can do nothing to assuage the paroxysms of nervousness from which the fowls are suffering, she ambles after a refractory retriever, who is being lugged along towards the dog-box by an impatient guard; and, as I watch her luring him on with bits of cake, which she produces from the bowels of a plump black

satin bag that hangs on her arm, my prophetic soul tells me that this is my future sister-in law, Mrs. Macpherson.

She is dressed in woollen materials that are too warm and heavy for the time of year, and the form of her dress is old-fashioned, but there is nothing *outré* or ridiculously national in her appearance, as I had foolishly led myself to suppose there would be. She is not covered from head to foot with the plaid of her clan; she is the reverse of puritanically severe in her aspect. As she looks rapidly about her—in search of something that she may assist, it seems to me—with bright, intelligent eyes, I feel that the kindness so freely rendered to the cackling hens and the crouching dog will not be withheld from me, however culpable I may have been concerning her brother.

Having coaxed the retriever into a better frame of mind and the dog-van, she comes quickly back to where I am standing, looks at my boxes and me, and says—

“You’re the young lady my brother,

Robert Murray, has asked me to meet ? I knew you by your hair when you stepped from the carriage, but I thought I'd wait one while before I spoke to you, to see if you're sorry or angry that he didn't come himself."

She has taken my hand as she speaks. and is giving it a hearty, cordial clasp, that presses my engagement ring into my finger, and counsels me not to attempt to deceive her.

"I'm neither sorry nor angry, and I'm very glad you came instead of him," I say, without hesitation ; and she nods her head approvingly at me, though her smile fades.

"Come out now to the coach," she says, leading me along ; "we'll have our tell when we get home out of the din and rattle."

So we march off the platform in procession with my boxes, which are delivered up to "my Mrs. Burnie," as Mrs. Macpherson calls a woman who, dressed very much like her mistress, takes them off in a cab, while we follow in a little brougham.

Our progress through the streets is not a rapid one, for Mrs. Macpherson sees everything evil that happens to everybody and everything on every side, and generally insists upon getting out to see if she can do anything to remedy the evil. The fall of an omnibus horse delays us for some time, and we are hardly clear off from the scene of that accident, when she insists upon stepping out of her "coach" again, like a beneficent, fat old fairy, and risking hydrophobia in the attempt to separate a couple of fighting kennel curs. She aids a sobbing woman to draw a drunken husband from a pot-house by the gift of a few silver coins, and she causes contrition to reign in the heart of a frivolous-minded nursemaid, by trotting to restore two lop-sided babies to their perpendicular in a perambulator. I confess to myself that existence might become intolerably spasmodic if passed with one addicted to making these charitable raids; at the same time I recognize fully that such a nature as hers will be a valuable

prop and stay to me. She is full of pity, and love, and tender leniency for her fellow-creatures, and while she serves the sinned against, she is not severe on the sinner.

Her rooms in the house in which she is lodging look to me as if they must be portions of her Scotch home brought over bodily, and fitted in cosily to a grim London house. Every trace of the crude, garish vulgarity of lodging-house furniture is done away with. Soft rugs of wool, lined with white and grey furs, cover the sofas, and Shetland shawls fine as cobwebs, some scarlet and some white, hang about ready for use from the backs of chairs. A silken-haired, brown-eyed collie, with a big feathered tail tipped with white, lies on a huge deerskin before the fire. A big grey tabby cat, who purrs as loudly as a thrashing machine the moment he catches sight of his mistress, occupies the most comfortable chair in the room; and a blue-faced monkey, perched upon a stand, makes unceasing grimaces that would be grotesquely

make a clean breast of it at once. As it is, I defer the hour of explanation, and say—

“He wanted me to come, and I wanted to please him.”

She gives a little unsatisfied shake of the head, as she looks at me searchingly, but there is no displeasure in her face. Presently she says—

“His first wife loved him well, *puir* lad. It's just a pity that he's forgotten he's not the same he was when he married her; he might have made you forget the one who has gone before him with *you* if he had been. As it is, you've not forgotten, and ye must tell me. Tell me who 'tis ye remember, and all about it? *Puir* child! *puir* lassie!”

The Scotch accent grows stronger as she grows more earnest; it appeals to me so strongly, that I believe I should tell her all my trouble, all my doubts, all my foolish, fatal fears of being misunderstood, if, by a new exercise of the virtue of punctuality, Mr. Murray himself did not appear to interrupt our *tête-à-tête*.

"The flower I'm going to transplant," he says, calling his sister's attention to me as if he had planted, and trained, and cultivated me ; and I perceive at once that he regards his sister's opinion of me as of infinitely more importance than my opinion of his sister.

"See and have your coat brushed for dinner, Robbie," she says. "And when did you have your bit luncheon? And have you taken care of yourself to-day, man?"

Evidently he requires to be taken care of!

CHAPTER II.

“HE’S NOT THE ONE.”

IF I had been married to him a year, or a dozen years, Mr. Murray could not take me more completely for granted than he does. It is just tolerable during dinner, tolerable though tedious, for he discourses to me about the epicurean tastes and the splendour generally of the old Romans and Greeks. In fact, he talks to me as if I were a youth whom it were his pride and pleasure to instruct; and though I am rather bored, I am just enough to acknowledge that it is I who am to blame, and not he. But, after dinner, middle-aged drowsiness overcomes him as he sits before the fire, and I tingle all over with disgust at the pros-

pect of having to watch his unbecoming slumbers through all the evenings of my future life.

Mrs. Macpherson plants herself on the sofa, with Laird at her feet, and Nannie, the cat, on her lap, and with bright, wakeful eyes watches her brother and me observantly. For a time I feign to be unconscious of her observation, as I lounge back in a chair by the side of the hearth. I concentrate all my attention on Mr. Murray’s half-recumbent form and sleep-obscured face, and question myself as to how I shall endure it when endurance becomes my duty.

I look at him until all recollection of all that is cultivated, refined, and intellectual in the man’s soul and mind vanishes from my memory, and I see him and think of him only as he is externally—stout, short, and ungraceful, with every trace of the glory of youth gone from him.

He wakes himself suddenly with a little snort, and opens his eyes and smiles at me,

not in an apologetic, but merely in an explanatory way. "After a long day's writing I like my after-dinner nap," he says, settling himself into a still more comfortable position, and going off into balmy slumber with a sigh of satisfaction that is prolonged into a wheeze.

All the elastic young muscles in my body, all the rapidly circulating blood in my veins, all the youth and love of change and action in my heart, rise up in revolt and protest against being fettered down to the continual contemplation of this physical inactivity. I feel so strong and supple, so eager for change and novelty and excitement, so full of desire to exercise these qualities and inclinations, that the contemplation of his middle age, and the monotony to which his slackened zest for all things will condemn me, rouses me, and I spring from my low seat with an exclamation of aversion on my lips, and an expression of it on my face.

"Come here, lassie," Mrs. Macpherson's quiet voice says; and I go and sit myself

down on the soft mat by the side of the sagacious, silken-haired collie at her feet.

“ We may speak now as if Robert were not in the room,” she begins, without lowering her voice in the least. “ He’s a heavy sleeper after his work—and his whisky toddy, *puir Robbie!* ”

I wince as I listen to her, but I reply steadily enough—“ I can’t help ‘ hushing ’ in a room where a person’s sleeping. I’m not used to it. However hard papa works all day, he’s never tired, like this, at night.”

She nods her head assentingly.

“ It’s just one of Robert’s bad habits, dear. He’s many of them, and no one will tell you of them more frankly than he will—if he thinks of it. Anyway, he’ll let you see them, for he’s as open as the day, and never deceived man, woman, nor child, nor one of the dear dumb brutes that have crossed his path, from the day he was born up to this day.”

She pauses, and if Mr. Murray did not

punctuate the sentence with a half-stifled snore, I should be more touched than I am by the noble and honourable qualities to which she pays such high tribute. As it is, the snore distracts my attention, and I gaze unwillingly at the snorer instead of replying to Mrs. Macpherson.

“His carelessness, now,” she goes on good-naturedly. “Robbie can tell you stories by the hour, that will make you die with laughing; but it used to go hard with his wife—poor Helen!—to make amends for it. The money he’ll lose out of his pocket, and no one be better for the loss—for he drops it through holes generally—would keep a decent family. We used to say, when he was a boy at home, that we had to follow him about with a needle and thread.”

I understand her motive thoroughly. I see that, out of her great pity for me, she is giving herself the pain of putting her brother before me in his most unattractive colours, in order that I may be driven into

freeing myself before it is too late. But all the little home counter-plots rise up in my mind and hamper my actions, and prevent my bringing about the grand *dénouement* which would make me a free and a comparatively happy girl again.

"I'm glad of one thing," I say inconsequently, taking in mine the kind, firm, warm hand of the sympathetic old Scotch lady; "I'm glad that anything—no matter what it is—has made me know you."

"See here, child?" she answers, calling my attention to the buxom cat. "I found this, when 'twas a kitten, on the hearthstone among the cinders, with a great log just ready to fall out of the fire upon it. The log was a big, beautiful burning log, my dear, but it would have killed the kitten; so I snatched her out, and—Nannie's a happy, contented cat, ye see."

I see; I understand everything, all she says and all she implies. But she knows nothing of Theo Bligh! It is altogether outside her knowledge of me that I carry

within me a smouldering grief that must consume me sooner or later. Oh, my bright, beautiful love!—who can never be my lover—why has the manager Nature cast me for such a suffering part as this, that I can never forget you, and that your worst faults and follies have a greater interest and charm for me than other men's virtues and merits? So cries out the sentimental portion of me, as I look at Mr. Murray and contrast him with the man whom I am idealizing. Happily, the commonplace portion will have its sway also; and this reminds me that Theo is a being with whom to be identified entirely is a little bit of a failure too, for his braggadocio breaks down occasionally under cross-examination, and then confusion is socially the portion of all those who have believed in him and it.

“Tell me about the home in which you were brought up, and the life you led there,” I say; and Mrs. Macpherson shakes her head, and answers—

"No, no, child; an old woman's garrulity is harmless enough when it doesn't stop the discussion of weightier matters. *You tell me* a little about your home and friends, and the life *you've* led; and then I shall be able to tell you a little more of the life I think you ought to lead."

I lean my head back on her lap, and cosset my hand down on Laird's soft, friendly head, and begin to gabble about Ravensbourne, and Claire, and our childhood. I tell her about the old thriftless life we have led between the dear old home rooms, and the wilderness, and the otter-pool and hunting-field; and I warm to my theme as I speak of Sydney Dale and all that he has been to me.

"But he's not the one, my child," she says, when I have finished my story.

"Not the one what?" I ask, foreshadowing in my mind the answer, although I ask the question in seeming sincerity.

"Not the one you're grieving for; not the one you wanted to forget when you

thought you'd take my brother; not the one you're remembering so sadly still, puir child ! ”

“ I do remember Syd sadly enough, though,” I say, trying to evade the point at which she is driving. “ I saw him two nights ago, and he was depressed and melancholy to a degree that depressed me. We ought both of us to have been in high spirits, too, for I had just had an adventure, and rescued a horse of his from a gang of gipsy thieves; ” and by way of diversion I proceed to recount the story of the way I carried off Kismet from the aggressors.

She listens patiently to my narration, but it does not cause her to deviate a bit from the straight path she is taking to my real feelings. As soon as I pause, she says—

“ I'm sure he is what you say, just a brother to you. The one who has driven you to take up with ‘ Auld Robin Grey ’ ” (she looks toward her brother as she speaks) “ will never take that place with you.”

“ Yes, he will ; not only in fancy, but in

reality," I say unguardedly. "He's going to be married to my sister."

"Oh! then he's the feckless lad my brother has told me about, the handsome, graceless fellow, who thinks that less well-favoured folk ought to work for him? So your sister took him from you, and though he's not worth having from what Robbie tells me, still that's not what a sister should have done."

"He was never mine to take," I say, eager to vindicate Claire.

"But he must have made you think he was yours, or you wouldn't have let all your heart go out to him as it has," she says, shaking her head. "We old ones don't always forget the lessons of our youth, child; we don't always forget the lessons of our youth."

I look up at her in amazement. Her dear old round, rosy face is stained and blurred with tears. She has suffered as I am suffering now, and though the days of her youth are long past, though she

has been wedded wife and is now faithful widow to the Macpherson, "still the memory rankles" of that love-lit, long-lost time, the thought of which teaches her to sympathize with miserable, bewitched me. Shall I smart under memory's lash as keenly as she does, I wonder, when I am as old as she is; or will age and fate have kindly deadened my faculties of feeling by that time, and nearly effaced the strongly marked lines and vivid colours in which Theo is now limned forth before my mind's eye?

I ponder over this problem so long that, when I at length wrest my consideration away from it, Mrs. Macpherson is once more the cheery, bright woman who met me on the platform, and Mr. Murray is shaking himself free from soporific fetters, and declaring that it's eleven o'clock, and time for him to tear himself away from the rejuvenating influence of my society!

CHAPTER III.

A FEMININE FOOL.

“WE must give the child as much pleasure as we can; we can’t expect her to be contented with the quiet, jog-trot round that is enough for us old people,” Mrs. Macpherson says to her brother, when he drops in to luncheon the day after my arrival, and asks, “What we’re going to do?”

“I shall be free after five this evening,” he says; “we might take her to the theatre, Janet.”

He makes his suggestion rather timidly, but Mrs. Macpherson does not utterly scout it, as he evidently expected her to do. On the contrary, she treats it with so much

consideration that I am wearied out of all patience by the verbose discussions which she and her brother engage in concerning the relative merits of every theatre in London.

The treat is projected for my amusement solely, and I am grateful for the intention, but I would rather be left quietly at home to suffer the most excruciating dullness, than have to listen to Mrs. Macpherson's fears and doubts as to the propriety of every piece that is proposed, and the purity of every person who takes part in it. She knows less about all matters theatrical than Laird does, and Mr. Murray knows less still. But he has Shakespeare at his fingers' ends, and rolls out passages of great beauty and length, at intervals, while the debate is going on. I feel that, in their society, I shall probably cry at a comedy and laugh at a tragedy, and so I am rather pleased than otherwise when it is decided that, until she can possess herself of some more authentic information on the subject, she

will not take the onus on herself of introducing me to a haunt of frivolity and vice.

Five or six days slip away very quietly, and rather happily, I must confess, in spite of my anomalous position. Mr. Murray says nothing to me, but from the time when I stood like an iceberg before him, as he began to kiss me and say good-bye, he has let me feel that he has relinquished me. My spirits rise under the influence of this conviction, and I find myself growing as glad a girl almost as I was before I knew Theo Bligh.

Almost, but not quite, for the bloom has been brushed off my heart, and the halo that surrounds the head of the man I love is dimmed by the knowledge I have of his unhappy birth, and of the rage and shame that will be his portion should he ever come to know it.

It is the afternoon of the day before I am to go to Lady Torrens, in Green Street. A letter from her has reached me, bidding me be ready to be taken away by her to-morrow

at four o'clock, and fond as I am of her, and much as I shall like the sunny, silken life I shall lead with her, I am feeling very sorry to leave my present hostess. Moreover, I am feeling very sorry that I can't evade the explanation which she tells me we three must offer to each other this evening. "My brother sees the folly of what he wanted, and you feel the misery of it, and I know the wickedness of it," she says to me; "and when we've said this fairly to one another, we'll all be happier, Tim."

"How little you thought this would be the end when you asked me to visit you, and treated me as your brother's future wife," I say humbly.

"Nonsense, child! I wouldn't have made myself ridiculous by treating you as anything of the kind; and it's just the end I prayed God to bring about, when He put it into my heart to ask you here. Robert will say a word or two to-night that will make your conscience free, and show you

he's not the foolish man he was when he fancied you were the wife for him."

That habit he has of treating me more like a quick and appreciative boy than a girl whom he has thoughts of marrying, renders the parting a comparatively easy process.

"Janet has told us—at least, her manner more than her words have shown us—the folly of that dream of mine, Tim," he says to me genially. "You mustn't let the thought of it weigh upon your spirits any more. I shall write to your father and make him understand that the only amends I can make to you for the blind vanity which you were too true a gentlewoman and too sweet-natured a girl to wound as it deserved to be wounded, is to give you back your freedom. And now we'll say no more about it."

A little demon of perversity goads me into saying—

"After all, you give me up very readily."

"We'll say no more about *that*, either,"

he says. "Janet's very fond of you, Tim : you must come back to her when your visit to Lady Torrens is over ; and till your sister and that lad Bligh are man and wife, you're better with Janet than you'll be at Ravensbourne."

"Better, perhaps, but not happier."

However, I don't argue the point with my late lover and now, really, highly esteemed friend, who reads the evening papers, and eats his dinner afterwards, precisely as if nothing had happened. I don't feel in the least as if I have had a blight or a disappointment. I can hardly imagine that I am that most pitiable of all social misfortunes—the victim of a broken engagement. I enjoy my dinner too, and drink the wine and eat the olives which Mr. Murray specially commends to me. And now that it is no longer in the order of things that I am to have a great deal of them, I begin to feel that I shall miss his society, and his sympathy, and his conversation in a way that will forbid me ever

to forget him. He has had the good taste to make himself desirable, by rendering himself unattainable. The same feeling of vague regret assailed me when first I achieved the long-coveted dignity of "long dresses," and was debarred by them, and the consciousness of all they implied, from riding bare-backed ponies, "fielding" for Sydney Dale, and running the unbecoming but innocent career of a tomboy generally.

About eight o'clock a card is brought in and handed to Mrs. Macpherson, who looks at it first through her spectacles, and then over them, and then under them for several moments without speaking. Finally she hands the card to me, with the words, "What brings the young man here at this hour of the night?" and I see with very mixed feelings that it is inscribed with the name of Theo Bligh. My first fear is that Mrs. Macpherson, having fathomed my feelings for him, may refuse to admit him; my second, that he may have brought me bad news from home.

"Let him come in," I cry eagerly. "It must be something important to make him call on a stranger at this hour. Do let him come in."

In my impatience I move nearer to the door, and Mrs. Macpherson looks at me rebukingly for the first time.

"The young man can come up the stairs without your aid, my dear—if indeed Robert thinks he had better come up at all. He may stay on and spoil your nap, since he's been inconsiderate enough to come at all," she adds kindly to her brother; while I stand by absolutely quivering with the keen desire I have to look upon the bright, beautiful face, and hear the light, heartless voice, of the man I love.

"We'll make him welcome for the sake of Claire," Mr. Murray says mercifully, and I dart a grateful glance at him; and in another minute Theo is in our midst.

His opening speech carries Mrs. Macpherson, as of course he intends it to do; and dearly as I love him, I feel sure that

he has some motive besides the desire to see me in coming here. What the other motive may be I don't discover yet, but I distrust it unhesitatingly.

"It required a strong effort of assurance to bring me here to-night," he begins, with an air of deferential courtesy that is a new bit of "business" to me, and that evidently impresses Mrs. Macpherson very favourably. "Inclination led me here, conventionality counselled me to keep away, and despairing loneliness nearly drove me to a fancy dress ball."

"You did well in following inclination for once," Mrs. Macpherson tells him heartily. And then Theo proceeds to paint a pathetic picture of the aching void which life is to a young man of virtuous tendencies, and a thoughtful but still gregarious turn of mind, when condemned to the barren solitude of lodgings.

"To be sure, you will say there are plenty of theatres and billiard-rooms and clubs, to say nothing of other places, open to young

fellows like me," he pleads. "But I've been given a taste for something better than these down at Ravensbourne, haven't I, Tim?" he asks suddenly, in an affectionate tone, turning to me.

And I, forgetting how little real stuff there is in the matter, am so entirely carried by his manner for the moment, that I say, "Yes, Theo," effusively, and feel myself to be a fool for saying it.

"Let the lad feel that he's having a warm welcome home every time he comes here, Janet," Mr. Murray says to his sister before he departs this night. "We must try to keep him straight for *her* sake, for she's rarely fond of her sister Claire."

"You're so wise and so good at keeping every man but yourself straight, Robbie," his sister answers tenderly. "It's all your unselfishness, I know well, man. If you haven't a sorrow of your own to drown, you'll try to drown a fellow-creature's."

"Don't give us a sermon, Janet," her brother replies, with equal goodnature,

"but just order up the lemons; it's the time for whisky toddy."

"It's like Robbie, to forget that there's anything stronger and wickeder than the lemons in toddy," Mrs. Macpherson whispers to me, as she rings to order in the fierce, smoky liquid, whose fumes presently fill the room and mount to Theo's brain.

I hardly recognize him as he becomes momentarily more and more truthful under the influence of the most subtle—the *only* subtle—Gaelic foe we have. He seems to me to be so real and earnest, as he bemoans himself to Mrs. Macpherson, that I can't help believing for a few infatuated minutes that he has a great future before him, if only he will put his shoulder to the wheel. That Mrs. Macpherson, with all her Scotch shrewdness, is of my opinion also is patent to me before this evening closes.

"The old lady will bleed freely," is Theo's whispered, laughing, farewell speech to me to-night.

Mrs. Macpherson's sweet, sober, sympa-

thetic utterance is—"All that money can do to make the lad worthy of your sister shall be done, dear. If I could give a daughter to him, I'd be a happy woman this day."

Not even the widow's sombre dress can do away with the intensely warm and sunny brightness of Lady Torrens. She sparkles up to the door in a little victoria, and as her eyes gleam, and her face flushes with pleasure at sight of me, she looks so bewitchingly womanly and attractive, that for Claire's sake I am glad that Theo is not here to see her.

"I feared I should have a fight before I got you out of the fastness," she says, as we drive off, leaving Mr. Murray bowing, hat in hand, on the pavement. "Why didn't you endorse my invitation to Mr. Murray, Tim? He was waiting for his little lady-love to tell him she too would be glad to see him."

"I'm not that any longer," I say.

"Not what any longer—not glad to see him, or not his little lady-love? My dear Tim, don't be foolish! I had my young lovers too, Tim, in the days when I was free and pretty with the prettiness of freshness and youth, but I married a much older man than Mr. Murray, and I was happy; for I was safe and cared for, prized and *loved*. It's the safer plan, dear—marry the lover, not the loved. No woman is a queen to the man *she* crowns; we are always 'beggar-maids' to the monarchs whom we ourselves elect to reign over us."

"It's all come to an end between Mr. Murray and myself," I say, with girlish pomposity; and she draws the whole story from me, and hears that Theo is to the fore again.

"How specious he is," she says, shaking her head, as I tell her of the way in which he has traded on his loneliness, and created an interest for himself in Mrs. Macpherson's essentially humane nature. "I wish now that I had gone in and been introduced to

your Highland dame; I should have known then to what extent she is likely to become immeshed in his net. That speech about giving him a daughter gladly, if she had one, is suspicious. One never knows what these matured ladies, who begin by playing the maternal part, will be at—and Theo will sell his soul for money.”

“She’s much too old and too good——”
I am beginning, but she checks.

“Hush! Don’t word anything you may fear or disbelieve, but trust me. A woman is never too old to make a fool of herself, and very rarely ‘too good’ to be driven into a dubious course by a man in whom she has faith. She must be a rabid philanthropist to lay her fortune at his feet the first time she sees him.”

“How you exaggerate,” I protest. “It’s her nature to be kind to everything that’s in want of kindness. She would settle an annuity on a decayed cat, and——”

“Offer a premium for the vice and idleness of a well-bred, good-looking puppy,”

Lady Torrens says. "My dear Tim, I'm not harsh generally in my judgment of my own sex, am I? but, according to your own showing, Mrs. Macpherson is a fair specimen of the feminine fool."

"The only side of her that I've shown to you is her liking for Theo," I can't help saying.

CHAPTER IV.

“YOU ARE A GOOSE, TIM.”

A WEEK slips away rapidly in Lady Torrens' society, and at the expiration of it I am able to report conscientiously to Claire that Theo has not been running into temptation, by seeking to effect an entrance into her ladyship's presence. We ride in the Row every morning, and though a hundred hats are raised to Lady Torrens, not one of them covers the head of Theo Bligh. We drive every afternoon, and still he is not one of the herd of acquaintances who crowd about my bewitching hostess. Whatever he may be doing, it is clear that he is not wasting his time by frequenting haunts of fashion. I hope fervently, and try to believe, that he

is at work in earnest at last; and this thought consoles me for his absence, and enables me to be patient, though the burden laid upon me, of never even hearing of him, is almost greater than I can bear.

Meantime, I have received the warmest congratulations from my father on Mr. Murray and myself having recovered our senses; and from Sydney Dale I hear that Claire is annoyed about my engagement being broken off, and unhappy about Theo, who rarely writes to her, and leaves her in utter ignorance of his plans and pursuits. Altogether, severely as I struggle to retain a remnant of faith in Theo's honour, his conduct to Claire, and Sydney's comments upon it, compel me to condemn him entirely, and distrust his fidelity to everything but his own selfish ends.

"I mustn't let Mrs. Macpherson think that I'm forgetting her; I'll go and see her this morning, while you're riding," I say to Lady Torrens, as we meet in her boudoir for our morning coffee.

"And you mustn't let Mr. Murray think that you're ungrateful for his having released you so sagaciously," she answers.

"Ungrateful! Far from that; my gratitude, my admiration, my friendship, my sympathy—they are all his."

"And he would give them all for your love, you funny little thing," she says meditatively; "and you give your love to Theo, though you've no feeling of gratitude, or friendship, or sympathy for him, I hope. How one-sided and badly designed everything is!"

"Don't say I've no friendship for him," I protest. "I'd make any sacrifice I could that would secure his happiness. If I had a fortune I'd make it over to Claire, that she might marry him. Isn't *that* friendship for him?"

"It's transcendental imbecility," Lady Torrens laughed. "My dear Tim, you'll be a much happier woman when you can feel as I do, that the man isn't born yet who can appreciate a woman's sacrifice, or repay

her for making it. I wish you could see Theo Bligh as I see him. I wish you could realize that he's about as ignoble a creature as was ever born to be the bane of every woman he meets, from his mother down to the worst feminine toy he ever played with. He's unutterably mean and selfish, Tim! Forget that glorious young figure and face, and think a little of the qualities they clothe. I wonder what sort of a woman his mother was?"

"She died when he was a baby," I say in an extenuating tone, as if in that fact were to be found countless excuses for all his shortcomings; and then I remember the blot on his birth, and pity him more than ever.

"You are a goose, Tim," she says, shaking her head at me. "I'm getting hopeless about you; you're such a faithful goose. There's many a love in a life, dear, 'ere we learn to love wisely and well.' The women who can't forget are more to be pitied, I think, than any other of God's

creatures, for they're always sure to remember the wrong man."

"There can be no harm in remembering the man who's going to marry my sister," I expostulate. "How can one forget a member of one's own family who is always being discussed?"

"Don't advance specious arguments," she says gaily; "and take me for your model in one respect, at least. I confess that I was infatuated with Theo Bligh, but when he let me find out how much smaller he was than myself, I cured myself of him as I would of a fever or any other disease. Go home and marry Sydney Dale, if you don't meet with any one you like better who is as well off as Sydney, under my auspices: with health, horses, and wealth, any woman may be happy if she likes."

She stands before me, glowing with beauty, spirit, and satisfaction, a living example of the truth of her words. Why can't I take her for my model? Why can't I do as she has done, marry for money, and

reap the reward of having everything about me that money can procure to make life smooth and pleasant?

"I'll try to follow your advice," I say; "I'll try and turn worldly; but just this morning I'll go and be good, and uncalculating, and unselfish, and unworldly in Mrs. Macpherson's company. *Her* only weakness is humanity: she's a true Sister of Mercy unprofessed."

"I hope she isn't wasting her time in trying to do good to Theo Bligh," Lady Torrens says contemptuously. "She has money, and he has wit enough to get it out of her, if she gives him the opportunity of seeing much of her. Don't look incredulous, Tim. I read Theo Bligh as easily as I do many another well-bound, well-lettered, perfectly worthless work of fiction."

"I'll go to Mrs. Macpherson, and take a fresh lesson on the theme, 'Greater than all is charity,' " I cry, stopping up my ears; and Lady Torrens shrugs her shapely shoulders, and says—

“For ‘charity,’ read ‘credulity,’ where Theo Bligh is the object that excites it. I shouldn’t be in the least surprised to hear of him arrayed in the plaid of her clan, and accepted as the heir to her property.”

These words fall almost meaninglessly on my ears at the time they are spoken. I do not attempt either to refute the implication, or to deride it. It is meaningless, unjust, and above all absurd, I tell myself; and being these things, it is utterly unworthy of generous, sensible, bright Lady Torrens.

I reach Mrs. Macpherson’s lodgings, and find everything unaltered—save my dear old friend’s manner to me. She greets me kindly, but there is a want of heart and force in her salutation that jars upon and distresses me. The cat, the collie, and the comfort of the room are the same as ever. But a chill has fallen upon Mrs. Macpherson, and my spirits sink to a very low ebb in prompt response to the change in her.

"You're very happy and very gay with Lady Torrens, I suppose, Tim?" she says. And I tell her truly that I am as happy with Lady Torrens as I can be with any one; and then my voice falters, and the foolish tears fill my eyes, as I add—

"I get depressing letters from my sister Claire. It's all uncertainty still about Theo Bligh, and Claire isn't a girl to bear uncertainty well."

"She judges him by herself, and has no trust in him, perhaps," she says severely.

"Ah, Mrs. Macpherson, that's unfair. Claire has borne more from him and for him than I thought it possible she could have borne from and for any man. He has neglected her, he has kept her in the dark about his doings and plans, and he has professed love for another woman, and tried to hide his engagement to Claire—all this I know."

I speak steadily, but very, very sadly. It is painful to the last degree to me to be

compelled, in justice to my sister, to complain of Theo, and to point out flaws in his conduct. But there is little sympathy for me in either the words or the tone of Mrs. Macpherson's reply.

"You're ready enough to blame him, but what can you say for your sister's behaviour when he was at death's door, and was watched over and nursed by a woman whose wiles and lures were enough to tempt a saint? Did Claire ever go near him? Did her anxiety for him even keep her modestly quiet? On the contrary, didn't she make herself conspicuous by riding about constantly with a young man of large property, who, if she had succeeded in catching him, could have put Claire in the position her mercenary soul covets? • While the poor lover was thought to be dying, she angled openly for the rich one, and it was only when he drew back that she remembered that engaged people have certain claims on one another."

"What a garbled story you must have

heard !” I say indignantly, and Mrs. Macpherson merely shakes her head and smiles, and by so doing goads me into using ill-advised language. “Mrs. Macpherson, do listen to me, and believe me. You have had your judgment warped by Theo himself—no one else could be base enough to find fault with Claire; no one else could be ingenious enough to twist and distort facts in such a way as to make him seem the aggrieved, and poor Claire the aggressor; and as for Lady Torrens having used wiles and lures to wile him from my sister, she scorns him too much for his fickleness and falsity to take him even if he were free.”

“You can say all this of the lad you professed to love so well that his coldness to you drove you to take the desperate step of promising to marry my brother?” she answers sternly. “Tim, pray for a better heart and a juster mind towards the poor harassed boy. He’s none but good words to say of you; indeed, there’s no bitterness in the boy towards any one.”

“No one knows better than I do how winning he is,” I cry eagerly, “but when I hear of his trying to poison your mind against poor Claire, I must try to make you understand how insincere he is, though it hurts me to do it. Why should he influence you against Claire, who loves him so—who is going to be his wife?”

“I’m not so sure of that,” Mrs. Macpherson says, drawing up her head. “She has written him such a letter as no girl who is going to be a man’s wife ought to have brought herself to write. Her pride is in arms evidently, however it may be with her love, and she insults him by casting doubts on his veracity, and threatens him with a rival——”

“And he has been mean enough to show her letter to you!” I exclaim.

“He has told me its contents, not shown it. He came to me smarting under her false accusations, with his faith in her shaken, and he poured out his heart to me as he would to——”

“A mother,” I suggest, finding that she hesitates for a word.

“An elder sister,” she goes on, waxing rosier and more excited; and I begin to look at her curiously, and to ask myself if it be possible that the wild, unaccountable god can have lodged a shaft in the heart that beats within that matured, rotund little form. It is too ridiculous, too utterly unreasonable a conjecture to be seriously entertained. And yet what other influence can have been used to have made her wax to receive any impression Theo Bligh desires to make upon her? I am so astounded that I am on the brink of charging her with the folly. Then I call to mind her extreme sagacity in the matter of her brother and myself, and I see her wrinkles and grey hairs, and feel that it would be an unwarrantable insult to her to suggest it.

“Don’t let us talk any more about Claire,” I plead. “I can’t put the crooked matter straight, and I shall only say things

that vex you ; and you've been too good a friend to me for me to care to do that. How's Mr. Murray ? ”

“ Well in health, but ill in spirit,” she answers, and I feel that I am blushing with remorse. “ It's not to do with you, child,” she goes on. “ He's a strange mixture, is Robert. If you could have been happy with him, he would have loved you very truly, and thought of no other woman while you lived ; but as your heart wandered, why, he just did the wise thing and released you, and will make the best of it. It's a good heart, is Robert's, and it's governed by a sensible head.”

“ No one knows that better than I do,” I say enthusiastically. “ If I had been older or he had been younger, I know I should have been happy with him ; but you yourself thought it unwise and wrong to think of marriage, as there was such a disparity of age, didn't you ? ”

“ The difference of age was the least drawback in my opinion,” she says em-

phatically; "it was the want of will on your part and the want of money on both sides that rendered it so unadvisable. A few years more or less on either side are just immaterial."

I am convinced against my will that there is some solid foundation for the fear I tried to strangle in the birth as too monstrous a thing. Mrs. Macpherson is preparing a line of defence in case she is accused of making a fool of herself.

The rest of my visit to her this day is a pitiable failure. Mr. Murray comes in, but though he is kind and gentle as ever to me, there is such evident estrangement between him and his sister that his presence does not improve the aspect of affairs. Can this be Theo's work? Is it necessary for the perfecting of any scheme he may have with regard to Mrs. Macpherson that he should alienate her from her brother? I weary myself with asking these questions, and failing to find answers for them, I begin to distrust and dislike and despise every-

thing and everybody, myself included. I want to get away from Mrs. Macpherson, whose common sense has broken down, thereby setting me all adrift in my calculations concerning her, and yet I don't want to face Lady Torrens just yet, with the confession that I have been wanting in foresight and penetration, and that Mrs. Macpherson is verifying the adage that "there's no fool like an old one." Before I can make up my mind to go boldly back and bear the pangs of detection, a pealing knock is followed by a springing footstep and a light-hearted whistle on the stairs, and Theo Bligh comes in with an air of being quite at home, that makes my position a very perplexing one.

Mr. Murray responds coldly to his greeting, but Theo is far too good an actor to show even that he marks the coldness. The collie wags his well-fringed tail in welcome, the cat purrs out a sleepy salute as he brushes past her, and Mrs. Macpherson radiates pleasure at sight of him from every

square inch of her broad, beaming face. He is a time-server—he is an arch-deceiver and hypocrite—he is a humbug, I can’t help feeling and acknowledging, as he bends his animated, Apollo-like young head down towards her, and says—

“ I’ve been dodging the performing cats about the whole morning ; at last I saw the fellow strike the tabby cat several times with a strap till the poor brute howled, but had to fence again ; then I was down upon him at once with a policeman.”

“ Did you succeed in getting the cats from him ? ” Mrs. Macpherson breaks in eagerly ; and Theo deliberately helps himself to sherry and bitters before he answers—

“ I succeeded in getting the cats, but not in keeping them. I put them into a cab and was driving here with them, but just down by Mudie’s there was a crowd and a noise, and the beggars got frightened and bolted through the window. I’d paid a hundred pounds for the pair, too, as you’d made up your mind to redeem them from

slavery. You'll never make me your agent again."

"May the Lord restore her senses!" Mr. Murray mutters to me, as he gets up and shuffles out of the room; and, feeling sick, sore, and disgusted, I ask at once for a cab to be sent for. When it comes, much against my desire, and not quite in accordance with Mrs. Macpherson's design, Theo insists on taking me down to it. Rapidly as I walk, he finds time to say—

"Tim, don't 'scorn and let me go' in this way. Poverty's a hard task-master. Do you think it's pleasant and congenial to me to go about avenging outraged cats, and pandering to an old woman's mania for mercy? But what can I do? I've no profession; I've no prospects; 'all the markets overflow,' at any rate I can't supply a single thing that there is any demand for, excepting the flattery and the fooling that all women, old and young alike, crave for."

"And you supply that flattery and fooling for—what?" I ask.

“There’s no price fixed yet,” he answers, recovering his gaiety in his old spasmodic manner. “Let me come and see you, Tim. Lady Torrens can’t be spiteful enough to want to come between us ; she doesn’t know that I have been in love with you.”

He says the last words in a whisper, as he hands me into the cab ; and all I can bring myself to say is—

“You are false, Theo !”

“Though you fancy that, how true you are to me !” he murmurs tenderly.

CHAPTER V.

AT THE RINK.

I FIND Lady Torrens ready dressed for the rink when I get back, and she follows me into my room, nominally to assist and hasten me at my toilet, in reality to find out what I have heard and suffered at Mrs. Macpherson's.

“You look positively haggard, Tim. Has Mr. Murray done anything desperate in the way of lemons—and their accompaniments—on account of his disappointment, or does he bear it in such a philosophical way that your vanity is nettled? No; it's something nearer to you and harder to bear than either of these. Poor Tim!” she adds heartily; “it's something fresh and disagreeable

about that man on whom you've wasted so much genuine feeling already that I wonder you have any left to expend. Tell me—what is it?”

“I wish I knew,” I reply; and then I tell her as nearly as I can recollect all that has taken place.

She gives an unaffected shudder as I strive to reproduce as vividly as I can his manner to Mrs. Macpherson, and Mrs. Macpherson's manner to him.

“Oh dear, dear! Isn't it awful? What won't men do for 'red, red gold'? And *we* have loved that man who turns himself into a cat-catcher for the sake of getting lucre and an old woman's unwholesome regard! That's the bitterest thing of all: *we* have loved that man!”

“And Claire loves him still,” I splutter out.

“And so do you, you goose!” she says, taking up my rinking hat and readjusting its band of feathers with uncalled-for vigour. “You little moping, infatuated booby! what

is the use of my setting myself as a model before you, when you don't even attempt to copy me? Now, just bind your hair a little more closely about your head, or it will come down and disgrace you if emotion causes you to rink unsteadily. And come away with me, and look and be at your best, and thank Providence that you have no responsibilities of wife and mother upon you, but that you're a free girl still, justified in enjoying the hour to the utmost."

Her vivacity is infectious, and the costume to which the hat is an accompaniment is becoming. I revive as I look at myself in the glass. I feel somewhat as I did on that day when I borrowed Claire's dress and nearly robbed her of her lover. In spite of my stupid doubts and fears and dejection, I am keenly alive to the fact that I am anything but unattractive in appearance, as I take my place by Lady Torrens in the victoria, and we drive off to a big enclosed space of ground with an asphalt floor, that is sufficiently well super-

vised to be respectable, and not too select to be amusing.

Two or three well-authenticated and deadly uninteresting British matrons meet us at the entrance, and I am drawn into the skating vortex under the most exceptional auspices. I become meek, awkward, nervous, and demoralized generally the instant I find myself upon the ungovernable rollers ; but after a purposeless plunge or two backwards and forwards, I settle myself into a stolid, upright position, and try to look as if I liked remaining motionless without a motive.

Lady Torrens has skated off with a swaying, easy grace that I would peril much to emulate, leaving me under the charge of a lady who thinks it a pretty exercise, but who, at the same time, has a dishearteningly good memory for every accident that has happened upon every rink since the roller-skates were first introduced into England. As I stand there helplessly, she tells me of girlish spines and

skulls and legs that have been dislocated and fractured and broken in the pursuit of the seductive amusement. And I dare not even totter to a seat and take the rest of the tale of horrors sitting.

A moderately good band is clanging out a remarkably good waltz, and at least a couple of hundred of my fellow-creatures are swaying rapidly by in time to the music. A hundred more are staggering, stumbling, plodding, and tumbling round, according to their respective degrees of security, on their slippery stand-points. Altogether the scene is bewildering, and I feel giddy, and wish with all my heart that I dared move towards a seat without having the dread alternative before me of prostrating myself on my forehead and front teeth, or of performing a sort of magic measure on the back of my head.

It occurs presently to my temporary guardian that the skates have not been put upon my feet for the sole purpose of chaining me to one spot, fettered by terror


and inability to move. She recalls to her mind that her son is there. She impresses upon me that he is careful, and not given to foolish, fanciful flights upon the "outside edge" (whatever that may mean); and finally she sends me off with crossed arms under the guidance of a gentleman who undulates about like a willow wand for a few miserable moments, and then suddenly lets me drop with crushing force upon my knees in front of him, while he wildly paws the asphalt floor in vain attempt to recover his equilibrium.

We are stepped upon, grinned at, kicked, and eventually shoved upon our legs again; and with a face hot with discomfiture, and a hat knocked off its balance by the shock of the fall, I take my place by his side again, and prepare to let my skates carry me whithersoever their eccentric fancy may lead them.

"Don't think about what you're doing, and you'll do remarkably well," he says encouragingly. "That's right; bend well forward, and strike out boldly."

I obey his directions, and bend so well forward that my figure must resemble a note of interrogation, and strike out so boldly that my feet execute a clattering and novel figure entirely on their own account. But my partner in affliction and humiliation props me up this time, and we hobble round the rink without a tumble.

Breathlessness, deadly fear, and the concentration of my faculties on the one object of keeping my head off the floor and my heels on it, combine to render my efforts to emulate the lissom and supple grace of the adepts in skating fruitless. Thin young girls cut through the air like swallows; gracious figured women revolve and twirl and bend about with an air of ease and security that makes my attempts to conquer the mere rudiments of rinking seem elephantine. My gallant escort—he has been introduced to me as “captain” something or other, and I gather from some of his remarks that he is one of the military defenders of my beloved country—has saved



himself from downfall by clutching wildly at the wall, and has at the same time suffered me to slip into safety on a seat by his mother. I feel in a bright red glow from exercise and mortification, and at this very moment Theo Bligh skims past, holding a slender, graceful woman by the hands, and swaying from side to side with her in a way that commands admiring attention from everybody on the rink.

He lifts his hat in recognition, and before I have time to worry myself much as to whom his new friend may be, he is round with me again, alone this time.

“You didn’t seem to derive that pure and perfect pleasure from your first tour that I should wish you to feel, Tim,” he says; holding out his hands to me. “Come with me; you’ll think better of it after a turn with me.”

I mutter a brief statement to the lady in whose charge Lady Torrens has left me, relative to Theo’s position in our family and fraternal claim upon my obedience, and

then I stagger on to my feet, and feel absurdly happy because the exigencies of rinking compel me to cling to him, and rely upon him, and swing along hand in hand with him for a time.

“I wish you could have had a back view of your companion and yourself as you appeared before my delighted eyes just now,” he says, with a cheerful laugh, as he swings me along, utterly regardless of my frantic efforts to fall. “Where did you pick him up?”

“I didn’t pick him up at all,” I say, my feet seeming to slip away yards in front of me, as annoyance causes me to lose the little control I have had over them hitherto; “he’s a friend of Lady Torrens?”

“Where did she pick him up?” he interrupts.

“From his mother,” I answer curtly.

“I see—his mother’s the old lady to whom you thought it necessary to explain me just now. Hold up; that’s right! What is he?”

“A captain in some line regiment,” I

answer indifferently. I want to question Theo about the pretty woman with whom he has been rinking, but he won't give me the opportunity.

"Really," he laughs, "may I ask what is the affinity between this special branch of the British army and yourself? Is it sentimental or intellectual?"

"It's certainly not sentimental," I reply decidedly.

"And I'm shot if it's intellectual," he retorts; and, in spite of everything, I can't help feeling a little pleased that he takes sufficient interest in me to dislike seeing me on terms of the most superficial intimacy with any other man.

We go along in silence for a few minutes. I know that there is a great deal of bitterness in being with him in this way, and I dare not endeavour to analyze the feeling. I know that a dozen topics have a common interest for us, but I dare not touch upon one. So I just gather those perishable roses of pleasure, and let myself

go on with him for as long as it may be his pleasure to take me.

“Do you like it better now, Tim dear?” he asks presently.

“Much better; only directly I begin to think about it, I shall do something that will exceed in awkwardness every one of my former performances.”

“I hope not; for, without wishing to flatter you, I must say that you deserve the prize for hopeless incapability and awkwardness. There’s your friend again, waiting for you. I’ll drop you with him. I don’t question his being a very nice fellow, of course, but how on earth has he fetched you?”

“He hasn’t fetched me,” I say earnestly.

“Oh yes, he has; if he hadn’t, your sense of humour would have prevented your making a spectacle of yourself with him. Love is proverbially blind; but after having liked me, I wonder at your being able to like any one else.”

“I never have, and I never shall—in that

way," I say, with foolish vehemence. And having received this tribute, Theo feels that he has had enough of me for a time; so he puts me back into my seat, and skates off rapidly with an object—for I see him again in a minute, reeling along in time to the waltz music, with the same pretty woman who had excited a little of my animus and a great deal of my curiosity before.

"Look at Theo!" Lady Torrens says, pausing before me. "There's something fitting in his present occupation and companion. They're gradually effacing that horrible impression I got of him from your report this morning. Why are you not trying to learn to skate? Get up and come with me."

"I can't," I protest. "Theo has taken me round several times, and I felt safe with him. I'd rather sit still than try it with any one else."

"Of course you would, but that is just an exhibition of affectionate idiotcy that I don't want you to offer to the world at

large, or to him in particular. Tim, though I laugh at you, dear, I would give a great deal to be able to feel and suffer as truly as you do. I've forgotten what it is to be anxious and jealous, despairing or hopeful——”

“You hadn't forgotten how to be any one of these things that day I rode home with you from Dogberry Gorse,” I say quietly; and she answers frankly—

“No, I hadn't. I was trying hard then to nurse a weak, spurious sentiment into a strong, real feeling. My bantling died soon afterwards, and was buried in the same grave with my belief in Theo's honour. Look at him now, feeling sure as he smiles at us that we are both pining for more of that audacious, insolently beautiful presence of his.”

“I don't pine for more of it; I only want not to care whether I have it or not,” I reply, as Lady Torrens goes off, saying—

“Oh! love for a year, a month, or a day;
But, alas! for the love that loves away!”

"When you're tired of sporting with Amaryllis in the shade, I shall be happy to give you some further schooling," Theo whispers, coming close to me at once, as Lady Torrens goes off. "What was her sweet ladyship saying about me? Was she keen on the subject of the pretty woman I was rinking with?"

"Not a bit; she's not keen about anything you do or leave undone."

"Isn't she, really? Well, Mrs. Macpherson doesn't resemble her in that respect, so, while I think of it, I'll ask you not to mention to her that you've seen me on the rink. She thinks that it's flying in the face of Providence to skate on anything that can't crack away under your feet and leave you to be drowned. I've listened to her precepts and agreed with them. She mightn't like it if she knew that my practice was considerably less rigorous."

"You like deceiving; it comes like breathing to you, Theo," I say; and though I mean what I am saying thoroughly, and

loathe the sin of which I am speaking, honestly, I do love the sinner so much the whole time. "Why are you deceiving Mrs. Macpherson? What do you want of her."

He has grace enough left to colour and look confused for once in his unembarrassed life, as he answers—

"She talks of adopting me or something of that sort, and wants me to take her name. She's no children, you see, and no one has any claim on her; and finding me a poor friendless, fortuneless devil, she seems to think we may as well turn ourselves into a firm."

"Have you forgotten Claire?" is all I can say; and he replies—

"By Jove, no! But what is a fellow to do? Remembering her won't bring us any nearer each other. It's no use your trying to jog my memory; try and believe that I'm a worthless fellow altogether, and let me slip as your friend Lady Torrens does. She would see me break my neck at this

moment without losing her balance, yet I've said a good deal more to her than I ever have to you, little Tim."

"I do believe that you're utterly worthless," I answer; but I don't go on and tell him the truth, that I can no more forget him than I can forget myself.

"I don't ask you not to tell Claire anything you may have seen—or suspected," he resumes, as he circles about with me, with safety and celerity, for I abandon myself entirely to his guidance; "I leave that quite to your discretion. If you think it kinder to your sister to make her savage before there's any definite reason for her being so, tell her by all means; if you think you'll do more harm than good, maintain a masterly inactivity."

"I have been doing more harm than good ever since I knew you," I say, in a spasm of angry truthfulness.

And he calmly tells me that he knows it, and that it's very odd, but most of the women he meets do go mad about him,

without his going very much out of his way to dazzle their senses.

“They stick to me, as a rule, just as you do, little woman. Lady Torrens is the only exception to the rule, and I’ve known all along about her, that she’s blessed with a plethora of brain and a paucity of heart. Holloa! there’s ‘God save the Queen.’ Time’s up, and we must part, Tim!”

It sounds so like a final farewell, that in my agony of fear lest it may be so, lest I may never again see my bright bane, I forget Claire’s injunctions, and Lady Torrens’ aversion to receiving him, and say—

“Call on me to-morrow afternoon — I must see you once again.”

He raises his hat, and promises me that he will come, and I know that he will keep his promise if nothing pleasanter intervenes.

CHAPTER VI.

CAT AND MOUSE.

SURPRISES assail and shatter me on every side the morning after my first experience on the rink. Lady Torrens receives a letter while we are at breakfast, which she reads through twice attentively. When she has finished it she looks at me searchingly, and I say at once, though I can't see a character in it—

“ That's from Theo Bligh ? ”

“ Yes, it is ; and if there had ever been a particle of love in his protestations to me—if he had not deceived me from the beginning, deceived numbers of others in the mean time, and were not trying to deceive me

again now—that is all I would say. I would never betray the confidence of a man who had given me one spark of real love; but Theo simply gambles and speculates with affection. See; he would still prefer riches and me to riches and Mrs. Macpherson—at least, I take it that he would, for he tells me that his engagement with Miss Vincent is broken off by mutual consent, and that he is free now to offer me a hand as indisputably my own as is his heart. The young wretch is amusing! He thinks I may believe him.”

“And why shouldn’t you believe that he loves you? Any man might do it,” I constrain myself to say. I try to feel generously towards the charming woman who takes and lets go the liking of the man whom Claire and I cherish, with an easy facility that I would emulate if I could; and she answers—

“And many men do it, my dear Tim: in that fact there is the real panacea. Now, you see, I’m neither angry nor pleased with Theo for thinking that his latest vows would

go down with me. I meet him on his own ground; I say—

‘Love for a year, a month, or a day;
But, alas! for the love that loves alway.’”

“As I do,” I sigh out, and Lady Torrens laughs and frowns at me for my impracticable fidelity.

“Broken off with Claire!” I go on. “He tells you of it as if it were a mere nothing, and it will spoil her life. Even if she gets over it enough to marry anybody else, she’ll not care for him, and not take the trouble to do her duty by him——”

“Don’t nurse such sick sentimentalism,” Lady Torrens interrupts. “Claire is not the girl to let her life be spoilt by him. If he’s needful to her happiness she will recall him; if he is not as essential as you in your misplaced devotion think he is, she will turn down the page whereon his story is inscribed, and find balm in Gilead. Whatever Claire does she won’t let unhappiness sit upon and crush her as you do, Tim. You *are* a generous goose! In addition to your unhap-

piness about yourself in relation to him, you are ready to take up your sister's burden before you've ascertained that it is one. Oh dear ! how I wish that I had freshness of feeling enough left to care to retain anything that is pleasant and agreeable to me without being valuable ! I should accept Theo's shallow offering in that case, and so spare your sister the misery of marrying him."

"But as it is, you will——"

"As it is, I will answer him according to the dictates of matured experience and common sense—and you shall see my letter," she interrupts ; and with an unconcerned air that I would give worlds to emulate, she sits down to write her refusal to the man who won her heart at one time, and lost it through trifling with her pride. "There it is," she says, handing it to me presently ; and I read :

"DEAR MR. BLIGH,

"I will not go through the empty form of thanking you for the honour you have done me, as, conscientiously, I do not

consider that you have done me any honour at all. A forsworn hand and a perjured heart would, in my estimation, be a poor exchange for the loss of my liberty and self-respect. I remain truly your friend,

“LILY TORRENS.”

“It’s harsh,” I say concisely, and I cannot with anything like truthfulness bring myself to add that it’s unjust.

She laughs. “Tim,” she says, “you’re painting a mental picture of the way in which he will receive it. You fancy that he will feel hurt and cast down—that he will be sorry to find that a woman whom he has asked to be his wife should have such a contemptible opinion of him; in fact, you picture your idol discomposed at being found out and exposed to himself by a woman. Shall I tell you how I picture him?”

I nod assent.

“I paint him discomfited at the consequences of being found out. If I had gone

on being as credulous as—some other women would be about him, he might have secured my fortune and got rid of me at the earliest convenient opportunity after our marriage. Detection at my hands means failure to him, and failure is what he hates, not moral disgrace. Theo will always laugh off the latter, unless it affects either his position or his fortunes. See him as he is, Tim ; this is the burden of my song to you. Until you succeed in doing this, you'll fancy that he is suffering a variety of things that are quite outside his comprehension. Mendacious, vainglorious égotist that he is, it's beyond him altogether to think or fear that he may sink in the opinion of women like ourselves, whose good opinion is worth having. See him as he is, and ask yourself, is *his* a portrait that it is worth your while to hang in the gallery of your memory ? ”

She folds and seals her letter as she speaks, and before I have made up my mind what to say in reply, she rings for the servant, and sends it off direct to him. It is

a horrible, wholesome dose for him, and she is right, of course, in making him drink it. Still I am glad that, having once loved him, I feel that I would suffer anything myself rather than rebuke him as she has done. It is agonizing to me to know that another woman has it in her power to inflict a sense of shame upon Theo Bligh.

“He will probably light the first cigar he smokes after the receipt of it with my note: he won’t keep it to show, because it’s not flattering to him, you see, Tim; and as soon as he has puffed away his sense of chagrin he will go to Mrs. Macpherson. Blot him out from this day, Tim!”

She speaks earnestly, and I know that she speaks wisely. But, in spite of this knowledge, I merely shake my foolish head in negative and say—

“He’s written in indelible ink, I’m afraid. If I only liked him for good qualities, I might forget him in time; but I like him in spite of all his bad qualities, and I’m sure to be continually reminded of them.”

"Yes, you are," Lady Torrens says. "Unfortunately, he hasn't the exclusive right to the use of the arts of braggadocio and lying. You may match his 'inner man' any day; it's only the case that is unique."

I wonder if she is quite as indifferent, quite as scornful of him as she seems to be. If she is, she

"Never loved him truly.

Love is love for evermore ;"

and if she never loved him truly, she can never judge him justly. So I try to comfort myself, and prop up my tottering idol on his shaken pedestal still.

I am a little surprised, when we reach the rink this afternoon, to see Theo giving a great amount of bright, energetic perseverance to the task of surmounting the difficulties of the "double-step." I know that he must have received Lady Torrens' letter of rejection, for she sent it by a private messenger; I know how cutting its terms were; yet Theo glides up to us, before our skates are fastened on, with the free, happy air of

one on whom never so much as the shadow of a shade of disappointment has lowered.

"May I take you round? or do you mean to try a turn or two by yourself?" he asks, doffing his hat to Lady Torrens; and she answers—

"I think you had better take Tim. I can rely upon myself on the skates much better than she can."

As I am thrust upon him, and it is his habit to accept the inevitable gracefully, he takes me without hesitation, and after a minute or two he says—

"Who has Lady Torrens got hanging about her now?"

I take him literally and look round to see if any one is clinging to my friend.

"I don't mean at this moment," he says, rather captiously; "but she's not the sort of woman to be off with an old love before she's on with a new. You may as well tell me who's the reigning favourite."

"I think she's in the happy condition of not caring for any one at all; certainly

she has no preference for any one over another."

"She's always in that happy condition," he says, with a sneer quivering over his handsome, delicately cut lips, "but she likes other people to prefer her, and to make their preference very manifest. She's a bad companion for you, Tim. I wouldn't invest any real feeling in her myself. A thoroughly heartless woman is the very devil."

"She's not heartless, and if you think her so why did you want to marry her this morning?" I say intemperately.

"Oh, she's told you *that*, has she?" he says calmly. "I thought that if I could get a rise out of you, that I should rapidly arrive at the truth. My reason for asking her to marry me, as you put it broadly, was a very simple one. She had led me to believe that if I were free from Claire she would marry me; and Claire having broken with me——"

"She can't have done it!" I interrupt.

"I give you my word of honour that she has; I heard from her last night. Apparently

a sudden change has taken place in her sentiments about me, for she dismisses me as absolutely and grandly as if I had been hanging on very much against her will all this time. Here, sit down for a minute, Tim, and let me tell you something—shall I ? ”

“ You had better not,” I stammer, for I am in a tremor soul and body, half of fear and half of joy.

“ But *I will*,” he murmurs. “ Words can do no harm ; you can forget them if you don’t like them—no one will know they’ve been spoken. You have been the cause of the whole business, Tim. I loved you, and let you go to Brighton, and fancied that I had lost you altogether, and—turned to the others for diversion ; that’s the whole story.”

Liar that he is, how I love him still ! Inwardly, I am wounded, shaken, smarting and sore ; outwardly, I am as much at ease as he is himself.

“ What a pity it is that I can’t believe in even that pitiful excuse for your having behaved so badly to my sister ! I might de-

ceive myself into feeling tolerantly towards you still, if I could," I say quietly.

"Tolerantly!" He gives a low, satisfied laugh. "If you could only tone yourself down into feeling merely 'toleration' for me, you'd be a considerably happier girl than you are now. What is it about me, I wonder? Why, Tim, if I were ten thousand times more worthless than I am—which isn't possible—and you knew it, you'd love me as devotedly as—you do now, little woman. Come, let us have another turn."

He rises up and holds his hands out, and I take them and am drawn on by him, though I tell myself that he is bloodthirsty in his passion for conquest over me. For what purpose has he stained his soul with these latest falsehoods? Why has he striven to shatter the one rock upon which I believed myself to be founded, namely, my faith in his having cared for Claire from the first, and only having used me as a blind. Why? What nonsense it is, though, to question why the cat plays so gracefully

with the mouse ! Cat and mouse are cast for their respective parts from their birth, and bound to fulfil them.

For about three weeks we hear no more of Theo Bligh, and though I call repeatedly on Mrs. Macpherson, I fail to find her at home. Claire writes to me once during these weeks, and begs me, if I love her, never to mention Theo Bligh to her again. "He has quite broken down my patience and killed my love," she writes. "I mean to marry some one else, and be very happy, but I won't have his name mentioned to me. Papa is very kind and generous to me ; he seems to be quite pleased that two of his daughters are looked upon as rejected and jilted girls." When I read this I know that it is Claire's pride which is bent, not her heart which is broken.

By mutual consent Lady Torrens and I cease to speak of Theo Bligh, or of that past with which Theo is connected. She interests herself heartily in the family of

her husband's successor to the title and estates. The daughters of this branch of the Torrens family are not up to the mark of their position, and their pretty widowed cousin is keenly alive to their deficiencies, and genuinely anxious to remedy them. She has them up to stay with her, and introduces them to society, and her own dressmaker and milliner. She makes me ride with them; and altogether startles them out of a portion of that lethargy which has crept over them in the course of their uneventful, monotonous lives. It comes about that gradually the Misses Torrens make spasmodic confidences to me, and I discover that one of the greatest anxieties which oppress their maiden hearts is the dread that "Cousin Lily" may marry again.

"Why, *of course* she will," I say, with such profound conviction that I am impressed by it myself, and I look about keenly for a few days with the design of discovering in which one of the many men

who are about her Lady Torrens takes a special interest. And I come to this conclusion, that in her power of enjoyment, in her intense liking for life, beauty, pleasure, variety, and sympathetic companionship, she is as fresh as ever ; but that in love she is played out.

The echoes of the past are reawakened rather strongly the day before I go back to Ravensbourne. Mr. Murray calls to say good-bye to me. He has got his appointment, and is off to fill it in a day or two.

“ I was nearly playing the coward’s part, and slinking off without seeing you, Tim,” he says to me ; “ but you might have thought, if I had done so, that I was accessory to the deed—— ”

I see Lady Torrens put her finger to her lips, and he pulls himself up abruptly ; but it is too late.

“ What deed ? ” I question breathlessly.

“ My sister has bought that lad, and makes him call himself her husband and

‘The Macpherson,’ ” he says sternly ; and I feel as if I would gladly cower into a grave, to avoid the shame of facing a world that knows of Theo’s degradation.

CHAPTER VII.

THE KING OF TERRORS.

THREE months have passed since the words of doom were sounded in my ears by Mr. Murray. Three months of expectation, anxiety, hopes, fears, mortifications, and a multiplicity of minor miseries. In spite of these having been our portions respectively, neither Claire nor I are in the least degree emaciated. We have not "waxed paler and thinner than is well in ones so young." We go out into society, ride, play, and sing, dress, dine, and dance, as freely as ever we did. And if we don't sleep quite as well, we are not romantically idiotic enough to mention the fact to any one.

"'Tis an evil lot, and yet
Let us make the best of it,"

we declared to each other, when the blow first fell and we had to face it; and so we have faced it fairly in our different ways. Claire meets every covert attempt that is made to bestow scornful pity upon her with a scorn so much more genuine, that the offenders never repeat the offence. So far from shunning those who knew her story, she seeks every scene in which they are to be found, and invariably enlivens that scene. Like the "free and happy barley," she's the "queen above them all"—the queen of every social gathering, whether it be a revel on a refined scale, or a humdrum tea-party at Mrs. Poland's. Claire is always to the fore. First in beauty, first in brightness; fascinating every man; forcing every woman to feel friendly towards her because of her kind, spontaneous manner—and apparently utterly forgetting Theo Bligh.

As for me, barring the beauty and brightness, I am very much what Claire is, and I do very much as Claire does. We both occupy a more prominent position

domestically and socially than we have done heretofore, for Aunt Helen has left us, and the onus of inviting and entertaining, of managing and arranging all household matters, is on Claire now, and naturally Claire hands all the drudgery of it over to me.

Aunt Helen has left us, and left us of her own free will too, after a long interview with papa, which must have been a sufficiently sad one to both, to satisfy the worst enemies of either. They come back into the room where my sister and myself are after it, and say a few words that have a painful air of being prearranged.

"Your Aunt Helen has resolved upon going away, as you girls are grown up and capable of managing my household," papa says, with a ghastly air of ease that doesn't impose for an instant even upon the twins. "I regret her determination, naturally, but our selfish interests mustn't stand between her and her higher duties any longer. What do you say, Claire?"

"I say nothing," Claire says, lifting her eyes to the faces of the chief actors in the scene in turn; and then, though I haven't been appealed to, I put in—

"And I say Aunt Helen is quite right to go where higher duties take her, and where, perhaps, she will get more love in return for all she does than we have ever been able to give her." And papa begins to whistle, and Claire throws her head up a little, and the twins open their eyes and mouths; but Aunt Helen puts a trembling hand on mine for a moment, and says—

"Thank you, my dear."

There is nothing more approaching to a scene after this before her departure. But on the morning she is going away, I am prompted to pay her some unusual trifling attention, and she responds to it curiously.

"Tim," she whispers, "we old people have our romances as well as you young ones; I'm sentimental enough to wish you

to give me a promise that you will be a friend to Theo Bligh, if the day should ever come when he may need your friendship. I know him, and I know that he will tax it—hardly, perhaps. Will you tell me that you'll be good to him ? ”

I tell her “ Yes ! ” It's all I can say.

“ I am able to give you back a portion of what he owes you, Tim,” she whispers, putting a bundle into my hands. “ Try and think well of him ; try and remember that if he had had a better mother—one who had loved him too truly ever to scheme for him—he might have been a better man ; try to remember that the sins of the parents are visited upon the children, and that his father and mother wronged him from the beginning, and gave him nothing but poverty and shame for his birthright ; try to remember all that's best about him, Tim, and, if he ever wants your goodness, be good to him.”

It seems to me to be an utterly idle and vain request ; nevertheless, she infuses so

much earnestness into her manner of making it, that I am won to reply—

“I do promise, Aunt Helen; but it will be the fable of the mouse and the lion over again, if I can ever help Theo—or ‘The Macpherson,’ as we ought to call him now. As for ‘thinking well of him,’ I can’t do that, but I shall always love him.”

I say this doggedly, for I am perfectly well aware that though Aunt Helen asks for my suffrages for her favourite now, that she never has and never will give in her cordial adhesion to my love for him. In her estimation I am at liberty to serve him and to suffer for him—so is the whole world, as far as that is concerned—but she looks upon my love as a dubious honour thrust upon him. What is it about Theo Bligh which so warps and distorts the judgment of every woman, young and old, who comes within the radius of his personal influence?

“Be good to him, if he ever wants your goodness,” she repeats emphatically. “Other women will be found in any number to

flatter him and spoil him, but you *be good* to him, Tim. You've no beauty to snare him, no vanity to blind you into believing that his idle speeches are meant to hold good for more than the hour——”

She pauses suddenly, seeming to think that she has said too much in disparagement of what every true woman prides herself upon possessing, namely, my power of “charming,” though I have no beauty. But I literally have no vanity—at least, none that is so near to the surface as to be touched by another woman's half-grateful, half-jealous mention and acceptance of me.

“I'll never hold them good for more than the minute,” I say; and Aunt Helen relapses into herself, gives my hand a satisfied squeeze, and departs from our midst—who can tell with what feelings for any one of us?

I can't help remembering that she has spent a large portion of her life at Ravensbourne. I can't help feeling that, however unsympathetic she may have been with us

and we may have been with her, at least she has given a full equivalent for all we have endured, in time, trouble, love, and disappointment. I can't help feeling, in fact, that Aunt Helen is a woman, and that, as she has invested a certain amount of feeling in us Vincents, she has assuredly suffered by us.

A thunderstorm in June is a much more difficult matter to tackle than a thunderstorm in August. I realize this fact one morning when I wake up and find that there is nothing at all the matter with me, but that simply I cannot move. I drawl out a request for tea, and my maid tells me that my tea has gone cold—that I haven't taken my little bit of roll—that she's afraid it's upset me very much.

“What has upset me?”

I start up as she speaks, and she gets herself away to the toilet-table, where she fidgets with the inane trifles that adorn it, and worries me.

“What has upset me?”

I repeat the question so quietly that she is compelled to answer me.

“ Oh, miss, it's Mr. Dale.”

I subside after this, subside into utter indifference about all things. When I rouse myself at last, I hear somebody say that I have had “ a shock.” The phrase frightens me back into oblivion again, and for a long, long time, misery lies down with me, and I am conscious of nothing save her presence.

When I free myself from the soporific part of her embrace, I hear that Sydney Dale wants to see me once more, and they turn away and don't answer me when I ask why he asks me to go to him in that way—I, who would go to him at any time, anywhere, if he desired to see me. And when I say this they none of them speak a word.

The whole thing is photographed on my brain. I can but reproduce it—crudely and coarsely perhaps, but with cruel fidelity!

“ Go and see him,” Claire says. “ Go

alone, Tim; the time's past for being conventional—go alone."

"Why?" I ask vaguely.

"You'll know for certain soon enough—go! There! your hat is all safe as far as the elastic goes, and your dear little face is a sweet thing to behold, though you *do* look very white. I wish I dared to go with you; I wish I dared to see him now."

"What is it?" I ask once more; and she says—

"Go to Dalesmeet and hear; I daren't tell you. Kismet has nearly killed him, they say, but, till you tell me so, I won't believe it's true. He's turned from you to me—as they all do—but you wouldn't have given him a horse to kill him, would you, Tim? It *can't* be true."

I have been lifted up from bed and put into a hat and jacket as she speaks, and presently I feel that I am out in the air, and that I am responsible for the grey pony's doings. "Shall I drive him, miss?" the little stable-boy who accompanies me

asks ; and I yield the reins to him, and get numb with some unexplained fear and dread.

How pretty everything is ! There is a soft moisture in the atmosphere that is not "damp," and that yet puts everything in a gentle, liquefied light that is eminently becoming. How can I think of these trivial things as I drive along through the sweetbriar-bordered hedges where Sydney Dale and I have so often ridden together ? I do think of these and many other trivial things, in spite of reason and myself—no, not in spite of myself, for I am weakly inclined to drift whithersoever feeling leads me ; and I have no guide ! Fate has made me my own fortune, circumstances have made me counsellor to myself.

"And I hope you'll find that he's not gone, miss," my little John says, as we pull up at the door of Dalesmeet ; and as I get out of the pony carriage I feel inclined to cling to that stable-boy, I am so utterly wretched.

Mrs. Tierney meets me at the door, meets me with sighs and heaviness, and I crouch at once under the accumulated forces of family feeling and feminine hysteria.

"You must come to him at once, but it'll hurt him awfully to see you," she says, "and it will hurt you more, poor child, to see him. That wild, wicked mare!"

"How long—you here?" I try vainly to gasp out a coherent question. I want to know something so much, but I am not clear what it is that I want to know, or what words shall frame my meaning.

"I've only arrived this morning," she explains. "I got the telegram yesterday and started at once. Oh, the journey I've had, Tim! so long and hopeless, and to end in this!"

She turns away from me in her bitter grief, and I stand quite still, hardly daring to breathe, in ignorance still of what has really happened, only conscious vaguely that in some way or other *I* have been the means of bringing destruction upon one

who is dear to me, and who has been good to me.

How long I stand there I don't know—measured by my misery it must be a very long time; measured by the hands of a clock, probably it is only a few moments. She puts her hand on my arm, and I move on with her into a room that was the very heart of the house while Sydney's mother lived—the room where her children were always sure to find her of a morning; the room to which they took all their joys and troubles; the room where Syd and I have played hunt-the-slipper and hide-and-seek a hundred times; the room wherein he is dying now!

I need no introduction. I recognize Death in a moment; the whole room is filled with his presence: he permeates everything. I see him in the slanting sunbeams that come straggling in through the closed Venetian blinds; I see him in the solemn watchfulness of those who stand about a bed; above all, I see it in the face of the man who is lying here.

Coward that I am, I can't approach at once and treat him as the real Sydney whom I have loved and relied upon all my life. I dread coming near him ; he, in his powerlessness, is terrible to me ; and in my cowardice I cling to everything I pass—to a chair, to his sister, finally to the side of the bed, in which I bury my face as I fall upon my knees.

“ He wants you to take his hand ; he can't move it to you,” the doctor whispers, and there is something so awful in this inability that my soul dies within me.

“ He was the grandest of them all,
The manliest in his strength ! ”

Why is he down in this way ? Why is it that the strength, and courage, and kindness that have been mine to rely upon so long are here no longer ? Why can't I feel that this which is stretched at fearful length before me is Sydney Dale ?

I creep nearer and nearer to him in spite of my terror ; I realize that he is Syd directly I touch his hand ; and as my

quivering lips touch his cheek and try to caress him back into himself, the others stand afar from us, and I am alone with Sydney Dale and the King of Terrors.

CHAPTER VIII.

HE DIES.

HE opens his eyes as my lips touch his cheek, and they try to smile at me, but the smile struggles vainly against the weakness and suffering which are binding him down. In an ecstasy of love and remorse I clasp my arms about my dear old friend's neck, and mutter—

“Oh, Syd, my darling Syd!” in a paroxysm of impotent pain.

“Loving little Tim!” he says, in a hoarse whisper that does not bear the faintest resemblance to the free, strong, ringing accents of manly Sydney Dale. “You’re going to stay with me to the last, aren’t you?”

To the last—to the end of his time here, till he goes into the silent land, and we have no further knowledge of him! Would that I could go into eternity with him, for surely he will go where good, true souls dwell!

“Let me have more light!” he gasps, and I see that his vision is darkening fast. But I can’t take my clinging arms from round him while there is any life left to cherish in his form. I can’t give up the chance of getting one more loving look, one more tender word, before Sydney Dale and I part for ever. So I motion to open the window and to raise the blind, and let in more of the bright, glorious sun and the free, pure air.

How silently and motionlessly we sit by him after this! We are all so powerless before the grim Destroyer who is overcoming him so rapidly. The death-sweat has broken out on his brow; his breath comes more and more faintly: Sydney Dale is dying fast. There has been a curse on the inter-

course which began so sweetly when we were all little children, for Claire has broken his heart, and the horse I gave him has killed him.

He makes one more effort, but this time, though the eyes open slowly and turn towards my face, they no longer see me.

"You're here still, Claire?" he gasps. "The poor little mare! it wasn't her fault. Kiss me, Claire!"

I press my lips to his as Claire would if she were here and loved him. And so he dies, happy in his delusion at the last, let us hope—happy in the belief that it is Claire who has caught his dying breath, and let him carry her love and kisses with him into the unknown world, as a last remembrance of this one which he is leaving.

I rouse myself with a start and a shudder to the knowledge that what I am clasping is senseless flesh. It is an awful thought! I can't think of it by the conventional word "clay;" I can only remember that it is dead flesh and blood which I am holding to my

heart—that it does not respond to my tender warmth, and that it will never, never move, nor speak, nor be actuated by any feeling whatever again. The thought is awful to me, and in my terror I can't free myself, for I have slipped one arm quite round his neck, and the dear head has become so heavy, that it seems to have locked me down.

“Let me go!” I cry piteously, abject terror of the “incomprehensible” gaining the mastery over me. “Syd, it's not *you* any longer; let me go!”

Scared out of my senses, bewildered, and unstrung, I strive to scramble away, and am restrained by that passive power which it seems sacrilege to oppose; and all my grief for the loss of him is merged in the passion of fear I feel of the form that was Syd, and that he has gone away and left me in some mysterious way.

They restore me with their common-places presently, and I find that I am standing by the window, that a sheet has been thrown over that which lies on the

bed, and that the doctor and some of the servants are begging us dear ladies to be calm, and to go away from the sad spectacle. Calm! I shall never be anything but calm again. I feel I have been shocked, stultified, subdued out of all power of ever experiencing agitation again.

“ You needn’t feel fear, poor dear lamb,” the nurse says unnecessarily; “ he never hurt a living thing while he was here.”

I know that quite as well as she can tell me. What shatters me to pieces is that Syd is not here now, and that what has been Syd all my life to me is lying there, under that awful sheet. As I get myself away out of the room at last, I steal back one more look over my shoulder, and the fine linen has settled itself down so closely that every feature is expressed. I leap on with bent head and outstretched hands, and my nervous, flying footsteps are arrested by Claire.

Her darling face is convulsed with weeping, but I disregard even her anguish in my own pain.

"I'm too late to see him?" she begins.
"No, I'm not: don't tell me that, Tim;
come with me."

"Where?" I falter.

I shrink from telling her "he is dead." Death is so much more awful to me, now that I have seen it, than I have ever supposed it possible to be before I looked upon it. I would rather go into a lion's den, or a maniac's cell, than into the room where the senseless, powerless form of the man who has been dearer to me than a brother is lying. But Claire is persistent; she must see him again, dead or alive: she will see him. So Mrs. Tierney takes Claire away to the room, from the very recollection of which I shrink appalled. I meanwhile move about aimlessly, and try to think how it was that I could ever have been miserable before this affliction overtook me. He made up so large a portion of our lives here, that it seems that nothing can possibly go on without him. And it is the mare I loved, the gift *I* gave him,

which has brought this utter desolation upon us.

The whole story is unrolled to me soon in various terms, with a considerable diversity of style, but with none at all of matter. The cook tells me, and the gardener tells me, and the groom tells me, and the doctor tells me ; and the sum and substance of that which I gain from these different authorities is simply this—that the best rider in our county was thrown by the fidgety little mare Kismet, who took fright at a crash of thunder or a flash of lightning, and dashed herself and her master to pieces in a thick plantation, close by his own home.

“The mare was found dead,” they tell me, “and poor master not much better. He never spoke a word till you came, miss. It’s a hard day for us all—hard on him, poor dear gentleman, to die and leave no son to follow him ; and hard on us all, for we shall never serve a better master.”

So they speak, their selfishness making itself apparent at once, in a way that is

essentially human. And I listen to them in silence, and look at them curiously, and wonder why Kismet couldn't have executed her grand fatal *coup* in company with one of them, instead of with the one whose loss has left me bankrupt in hope and friendship; for, though he had transferred his love from me to Claire, I know for a fact that I have lost in him my staunchest, truest, worthiest friend.

The days pass over, and Sydney is buried; and papa comes home from the funeral, and from hearing the will read, with tidings that make me so proud and so unhappy. He has left money to me, and from the wording of the will every one who has heard it has gathered that I might have been his wife if I had pleased, and infers that I must have been mad not to have pleased. I don't care for the money—I don't want it, for Aunt Helen has repaid me the two hundred pounds which I lent to Theo, so he will be screened under any circumstances. Still, though I don't want it and don't care

for it, I love the proof it affords me of the estimation in which Syd held me, though I failed, like a fool, to love him in the right way.

Claire listens to the tidings very quietly, but somehow or other I can't help feeling that she doesn't quite like them. When papa says—

“You're the best judge, I suppose, Tim; but, if I had known that poor fellow ever thought of you in that way, I should have cautioned you to think twice before you said 'no' to an offer that any wise woman would have accepted.”

“Tim mistook friendship for love, I think,” Claire tries to explain. “He never proposed to you, did he, Tim? Never asked you right out to marry him?”

I recall what he did say at Brighton, and though I know well what he meant, I am justified in assuaging any feeling Claire may have in the matter by assuring her that “he never did ask me right out to marry him.”

"I thought not," Claire says, a light frown flitting over her face. "I am sorry that there's anything in the will to make any one think such nonsense. He had a warm regard for Tim, a true regard, but Tim was not the one poor dear Syd wanted to marry."

Papa merely lifts his eyebrows and his shoulders a little, and Claire continues to explain.

"If Syd had lived, I believe I should have married him in time. His unselfishness was so winning, and the truth was stamped upon everything that he said; and I have suffered so much from selfishness and deceit—haven't I, Tim?" she continues, with the tears bubbling up into her sweet eyes.

Poor Claire! She has indeed "suffered," but she does not suffer supinely. The outside world would never guess that she has experienced a single pang on the subject of Theo Bligh's defalcation and dishonour. Much as I admire her for not being supine,

for not sitting down and weeping, "Woe's me!" under her affliction, I still can't blind myself to the fact that, if her vanity had not received a bruise that hurt her more than the love-wound, she could not have portrayed heartlessness quite as effectively as she has done. But even to myself I won't blame her, for she has been sinned against deeply by one whom I still love so well, that I seem a traitor to my sister whenever I think of him.

"If Theo had only been steadfast, how happy this money might have made you two," I say meditatively to Claire one day; and she answers promptly, as if the subject had presented itself to her mind before—

"Yes, indeed; if it had only come to us before, he wouldn't have disgraced himself by a marriage with that dreadful old woman, that philanthropic fool; it would have been only like you to hand it all over to him, or to me for him, and Theo's love would have lasted if it had been strengthened by the thought of ten

thousand pounds; but, now, what's the good of it? It's not making you any the happier. You had as much as you want to spend while you're Tim Vincent before it came, and it's caused Sydney's brother and sister, not to feel annoyed with him exactly, but to think themselves very admirable and magnanimous people for not being annoyed with you. It's not that they want what you've got, Tim—of course their 'dear brother was quite justified in leaving personal property to any one he pleased,' as Mrs. Tierney says; but they think about it a little, and thinking doesn't make them happier, any more than the money makes you happier."

"It's a tangled yarn," I say gloomily, for Claire's remarks are about as dispiriting as any that I have ever listened to; and Claire replies—

"I was afraid you would say something of the sort. You have acquired the habit from Theo of fitting a line of poetry to the majority of things that are under discussion,

and some other bore has inoculated you with the fatal disease of uttering platitudes about the remainder."

I am not in the least nettled at her aspersions on my intelligence, but I am pained that she should think me false enough to agree with anything like implied disparagement of Theo's mental qualities. I have been hard pressed and compelled to surrender all faith in, and all hope of, his moral ones. But I will strike one little blow for that brilliant ability of his, which, as much as his superb appearance, is to blame for my abject slavery to him.

"If Theo had had the saving characteristic of being a bore, he wouldn't have been so fatally pleasant to every one, old and young, whose path he has crossed; and if he hadn't been so fatally pleasant, he wouldn't have been tempted, by flattery and gold, to the dishonourable things he has done," I say.

Her eyes flash and her colour rises.

"I believe you'd be tame enough to make

friends with him even now, if he crossed your path with that foolish old woman (who has made herself a laughing-stock) in his train. He has broken you most thoroughly on the wheel of his vanity, and yet you make yourself his champion even to me."

"I have a presentiment that, some day or other, you'll be glad that I've never run him down, Claire," I say; and Claire shakes her head emphatically, negating my suggestion, and tries to make me believe that her love for Theo is dead beyond all power of resuscitation.

It is soon after this that I receive a letter marked "Private," in the large, free, well-known handwriting of Theo. The receipt of it embarrasses me cruelly, for every one at the breakfast-table catches sight of the superscription at once, and marks the "Private," and looks away from me with the laboured air of being intensely indifferent, which only people who are

intensely interested about anything can assume. Intuition tells me that, for his sake, I had better attend to his careless attempt to secure privacy for the contents of his letter, and at the same time sympathy for Claire teaches me that the mere idea of there being anything clandestine in his correspondence with me must be exquisitely painful to her. Conflicting feeling makes me clumsy, and urges me on to the pursuit of a feeble, futile course that is infinitely distressing to myself. I half open the letter; it is thick and long apparently. Claire still looks away elaborately, but I feel as if she had eyes in the back of her head—eyes that are endowed with the power of inspecting my soul and analyzing the motives which influence it. I put the letter down, and pick up a sheet of the *Times*, and feel fast sinking into a state of idiocy, when Claire forces a conclusion by saying—

“Tim, hadn’t you better read that letter and know the worst at once? It’s from

Theo—of course we can all see that—and probably he wants some favour from you. Don't be afraid to open it ; I will not tempt you to betray him to me."

"Poor Tim ! the office of everybody's friend is about the most unpleasant one in the world to fill," papa laughs.

Then they disperse ; Claire sailing out of the room with a debonaire assumption of having nothing at all to do with either Theo or me, which is, to say the least of it, ungrateful, as I am ready to forfeit every chance of happiness which may be left to me in life for the sake of making either of them happy.

CHAPTER IX.

ALL FOR HIM.

“Morwell-in-the-Marsh, Essex, August 20th.

“MY DEAR TIM,

“My foot is on the Macpherson native heath no longer. You would let soft pity fill your kind little soul concerning me, if you could only guess what a time I have had of it up there, with the helpmeet whose unnatural selection of me removed me from the Ravensbourne sphere. It’s an awful thing to be an old woman’s darling, I can tell you, especially if one shares the dubious honours of the situation with every homeless and starving cur that finds its way to her.

“Seriously, if I committed an error in

marrying as I did, I've been punished for it as fully as if it were a crime. Mrs. Macpherson keeps a tight hand on the money, and diligently checks every effort I make to conduct myself like a free agent. In fact, she has, under that genial guise, as grasping and grinding a spirit as was ever parsimoniously trained and perfected. Her attempts to keep me in subjection would be odious and unbearable in a young and pretty woman—in an old and ugly hag they're simply maddening. I have got away down here for a week or two—alone, luckily, but I shouldn't be surprised at any moment to see her, her wrongs, and her cursed cats, and arrogant old servants arrive. I have heard of the windfall you had when poor Sydney Dale died: if I had been the lucky owner of his wealth, I wouldn't have waited till my death to endow you with it. You can run from your station down to this place in a couple of hours. I wish you would come off quietly one morning and see me. The sight of

your dear little face would cheer me up and send me back to my onerous duties better able to fulfil them. The fact is, *I must see you, Tim*, and I can't venture near Ravensbourne. Aunt Helen is up at the Highland home ; she and Mrs. Macpherson hate each other cordially. Drop me a line saying what day you're coming, and say nothing to any one about having heard from me.

“ Yours ever truly,

“ THEO BLIGH.

“ Address me at the Golden Lion, and as Theo ‘ Macpherson,’—I’ve to pay that tribute to her besotted family pride.”

The letter burdens me. He thinks it so easy to deceive that he has probably never given one consideration to the subject of the difficulties which will encompass me about it. I feel about it very much as a murderer must about the best means of disposing of the dead body. I can't put it in the fire, for the weather is warm, and

there are no fires in which to put it ; moreover, I don't like to destroy it till I have more thoroughly mastered its contents, and I am afraid, if I tear it up, that I shall forget the address. If I say nothing about it, Claire will conjecture something worse than the reality, perhaps ; and if I say something and not everything, they will all suspect that which I keep back of being too bad to bear the light of day. For the remainder of this day I go about with the stamp of guilt on my brow. I take the letter out of my pocket two or three times when I am alone, and begin reading it, and each time I am interrupted and startled out of all semblance of self-possession and innocence by some one coming upon me suddenly. I diplomatize more than I ever did in my life before about anything (excepting the two hundred pounds), in order to get a quiet half-hour in some secluded spot in which to write my reply—for it never occurs to me for a moment to disobey him. I drop him the few lines he has asked for, and I fix

an early day for my surreptitious trip down to Morwell-in-the-Marsh. Then I fall to plotting and planning how best to deal with that early day when it arrives, and altogether I feel very unhappy and criminal for bearing such a load of deceit about with me in the midst of my innocent family. It is accident in reality, but it has very much the appearance of a design to frustrate my plans, when Claire actually proposes "an outing," in a very simple, quiet way, for this very day.

"Let us take the pony carriage and a luncheon basket, and just go, the two of us, to some pretty place, and spend the day there. It's too glorious a day to waste in the house. Will you do it, Tim? or have you any other scheme to propose?"

I am dyed a guilty red in an instant to the roots of my hair, as I stammer out a lame apology for not falling in with her proposition.

"How limp you've become about everything lately, Tim," she complains. "I've

broken the day up in my imagination, and it will be quite lost to me; for I shall not know what to do with it, as you won't go with me. What *are* you going to do?"

Her unwonted pertinacity as to the pursuits I contemplate following this day confuse and lead me into a fearful mesh of falsehood.

"I hardly know; I haven't made up my mind; it's too hot to do anything very definite," I say hesitatingly.

"Oh, Tim, how ungracious you've grown! You have no plans of your own, and yet you won't agree to mine. Tim, you're not like yourself; you're changing. This money that poor dear Syd left to you is doing you more harm than good."

The accusation is awful to me; but I will let her think me "changed," purse-proud, anything she pleases to-day, rather than say anything that may lead her to suspect that Theo is once again weaving a net for my feet. I am conscientious about the majority of things, but when he is in

question, though I don't absolutely lose my sense of right and wrong, I muddle them up together and make him my only law. That he needs me now I am convinced. Theo would never take the trouble to write a long letter to me unless he needed me sorely. Therefore I must go to him, though in order to do so I must put Claire out, and make use of endless subterfuges.

I have found that a train leaves our station for Morwell-in-the-Marsh at twelve o'clock, and that train I must catch. I hear Claire say that she is going over to the market-town about seven miles off to shop, at eleven, so she will be out of my way. Unluckily, she chooses to have the pony carriage, and as it would be an unprecedented thing for me to take the brougham out in the morning, and, additionally, as I don't want any of the servants to know that I go to the station, I resolve to ride. There is nothing out of course in my riding away alone for several hours at a time, but this day I feel as if my object were patent

to groom, gardener, lodge-keeper, and every one else who meets me as I ride away from Ravensbourne.

The necessity for concealment seems to me to be so urgent that I make a *détour* and reach the station by a circuitous route, and only just in time to put my horse into safe keeping, and take my ticket. "I shall be back by the five train," I say to the station-master, who has seen me consign Firefly to a porter; "see that my horse is taken care of, will you?"

I spring into a carriage as I speak, and the station-master comes forward with maddening civility, just as the train is off, to assure me that Firefly shall be sent up to the Ravensbourne stables, and fetched for me again at five. Everybody will know everything! I am perfectly powerless! The train runs out of the station, and as we wind our way along, I catch a glimpse of the porter climbing up into my saddle, as a preliminary to taking Firefly back to Ravensbourne and instructing all there

whom it may or may not concern as to my very dubious-looking proceedings. How angry papa will be! How indignant Claire will feel with me! How thoroughly they will all of them misunderstand me, and how impossible it will be for me to explain my real motives! I form and re-form a hundred stories, and know the whole time that I shall not tell one of them, and that the truth will get itself blurted out, to the detriment of Theo.

I have let Theo know the time of my arrival, and as we run into the little station, which is represented by an uncovered platform and a sad-looking porter, I half expect to see him there waiting for me. But he has not thought it necessary to pay me that attention, and so I take my dreary path from the station to the village alone.

My progress is a very depressing one. The sun is out strongly by this time; the hedges are cut down so low that there is not any shade to be found, however close I creep to them. I am in my riding gear, and there-

fore have no parasol. I am painfully conscious of being a very conspicuous object, even here by the unfrequented wayside. How much worse it will be when I go up to the door of the Golden Lion. How distinctly I shall be seen; how derisively I shall be thought about; how desperately foolish I feel for being here at all.

As I go along, the dismal appropriateness of the name of the village for which I am bound strikes me vividly. The muddy marshes are about me on every side—dull, uninteresting wet lands, intersected here and there by narrow dykes. What can have brought Theo down into this flat, tame country? It is not a sporting country, and, if it were, the time of year forbids the notion of sport; it is not a country for sketching; and I feel sure that there is not so much as a trout stream in the neighbourhood. What can have brought Theo here? His home unhappiness must be of a desperate kind indeed, since it has driven him to such a doleful harbour of refuge as Morwell-in-the Marsh. What can have brought him here?

Indications of the village being close to me are on either side of the way, in the shape of a few stray cottages and one or two houses of rather a better order. Then I seem to come with a sudden jerk upon the church which stands at the roadside end of a large, straggling, unpicturesque yard. The heart of the village is lying open before me; in fact, I am in its only street.

I pass the village shop, where groceries and draperies contend for empire in the dusty window, and begin to look out anxiously for the Golden Lion. I have just caught sight of him, as I am about to pass the green-barred gateway of an abominably glaring, shadeless, stucco-and-shellwork garden, when my steps are brought to an abrupt standstill by the sight of Theo, and of the cause of his being here.

There he stands in the chequered shade of a most unromantic-looking porch, talking to the same pretty, graceful-looking woman with whom I saw him skating on the rink. Apparently she is striving to detain

him with pretty, eager eloquence and graceful, animated gestures, and he seems laughingly careless as to whether he goes or stays, for he saunters backwards and forwards with a cigar between his lips, his hands in his pockets, and the well-known, well-loved smile of bright indifference on the face that is still so exquisitely dear to me.

My habited and hatted form must cast a peculiar shadow on the glaring path, for he turns to look at me, and is down by the gate in an instant.

"Dear Tim, your train is early," he begins at once, "or I should have been there to meet you. I was just going to the station, and now you're upon me and have saved me the trouble. You *are* a brick, Tim!"

He has passed the green barrier and is by my side in the street as he says this. Then I suppose it occurs to him that he has left the lady rather unceremoniously, for he opens the gate and runs back to her, and—I do not hear his farewell.

When he comes back to me he has thrown away his cigar, his air of indifference, and a goodly portion of his gaiety. There is almost solemnity in the earnestness with which he says—

“I’m in an awful fix, Tim ; if you hadn’t come down here to me to-day, I should have risked everything and presented myself at Ravensbourne. I never wanted a friend so much in my life as I do now, and naturally I thought of you at once. You look fagged, dear.”

No; I am not fagged. I am not anything but keenly conscious that if this man were good, painstaking, conscientious, not given to acting upon impulse, and endowed with a large share of that prudent, cautious self-control which is wisdom’s root, he would not be half as interesting or half as dear to me as he is now that he is his own faulty self. The weight of my own folly in being so lenient to all his shortcomings fatigues me.

“I *am* fagged,” I say emphatically.

“Theo, not even our old friendship justifies you and me in playing such a perfidious part to—to——” I hesitate, for I am not sure to whom we are playing the “perfidious part,” whether it is to Claire or to his wife.

So fearfully have my notions as to right and wrong been distorted by my keen appreciation and dread of the difficulties encompassing the cleft stick in which I have been placed for the last few months, that I am still doubtful as to whether Claire has not the highest claim still on Theo’s personal allegiance. What is the real solution of the riddle of his being here with the lady with whom I saw him on the rink? I am not naturally curious on such matters, but womanly feeling causes me to revolt against Theo’s cool and practised deceptions. I long to ask him who and what this woman is. I long to reproach him for the omission of that courtesy towards me to which I, as a gentlewoman, am entitled, which he has shown in allowing me to arrive at the station

unwelcomed, and walk to the village unattended (though I am here on his summons), while he is in idle dalliance with this strange lady in a garden that is redolent of bad taste. But though I long to question and to reproach, I know that it will be useless to do either, for he will evade the truth in replying to the question, and laugh light-heartedly at the reproaches.

“ Well, Tim,” he says gaily, as I hesitate after launching the words “ We are both playing a perfidious part to—— ” at him ; “ well, Tim, before you hurl any more anathemas at me, let me ask how you think domestic happiness agrees with me. Am I looking as well as I did in those happy days before Mrs. Macpherson claimed me for her own, when ‘ I was a free and a fetterless thing,’ like the Greek girl’s heart ? ”

I look at him ; undeniably he is better looking than ever. He seems to me to have increased in stature, but a second glance shows me that this effect is produced

solely by his more erect bearing, and more determined air. He has lost a little of the *greyhoundy* grace of the boy, and gained in exchange the grander grace of the man who feels that he has a good position in the world, which his *personnel* well fits him to fill. Still he does not look a bit like a married man, and I can't help giving a moment or two to speculating as to whether that good-looking girl whom he has just left in the garden is aware that he is one or not.

"Well, Tim," he repeats impatiently, "out with the truth: has age withered or custom tamed me yet?"

Before I can answer, he turns in at the door of the Golden Lion, and I am too staggered at finding myself in the parlour of a common inn, in company with Mr. Theo Bligh, to give a cool and critical answer to his question.

"Where is your wife, and what are you doing here, Theo?" I ask instead.

"My wife" (he makes a grimace expres-

sive of the most profound distaste as he mentions her) "is up at her own place—I believe I've told you that already; I am here—simply because being here is as good as being anywhere else."

"You had no motive in coming? You have no friends?"

"None," he says, with the consummate coolness of a master in the art of lying.

"Then was your meeting with that lady with whom I saw you on the rink accidental?" I say, goaded into something like unseemly persistence in pursuit of knowledge by the calm way in which he assumes that I am credulous enough to believe everything he says.

"I'll satisfy your curiosity on that point, and then we'll get on to a more interesting topic—ourselves, namely," he replies. "If it hadn't been for that young lady—she's a fine girl, isn't she?—I should never have heard of Morwell-in-the-Marsh. Some one introduced us on the rink, and she spoke of the place she lived in, and somehow or

other succeeded in giving me a favourable impression of this infernal hole. You see, she's an unsophisticated girl, Tim—attached to the home of her youth, and all that sort of thing——”

“And she asked you here?” I interrupt.

“She did nothing of the kind,” he answers, flushing up; “but when the yoke of Mrs. Macpherson became too heavy the other day, I thought I'd come to the most peaceful spot of which I'd ever heard, partly because it's peaceful, and partly because it's within reach of Ravensbourne. Does my explanation satisfy you?”

“Not a bit.”

“What more do you want to know?”

“Does she know you—are married?” I ask. The last two words come laggingly, for as my question first framed itself in my mind it stood thus: “Does she know you were engaged to *my* sister?”

“Marriage has never come upon the *tapis* between us,” he says coolly. “Do *you* find it necessary to explain to every man

you meet that you are not married? Unless you do, I don't think you ought to call me to account for not proclaiming to every casual acquaintance I meet the unpleasant fact that I am."

"Then she doesn't know it?" I urge.

"Certainly not," he laughs; "why should she? My object is to promote the greater happiness of the greater number at the cost of the least trouble to myself. Now, I don't think it would make Miss 'Ashton a bit happier to know that I'm married, and the mention of the fact would involve me in a long-winded explanation; accordingly, I obey the golden rule of silence. Are you satisfied now?"

"Why did you send for me?" I ask.

"Because I want your help, Tim, and you have promised that, whenever I want it, I shall have it. What made you come in your habit? You're so awfully conspicuous, all the village will be talking about you, and asking who you are, and why you came."

"All the village will be talking?" I repeat,

with contemptuous emphasis. "Really, Theo, if the village and its possible opinion and probable impertinence are of more importance to you than my presence here, it's a pity you sent for me, isn't it?"

"I can't answer that question till the close of your visit," he says, with that invincible good-humour which closes all argument, and leaves the aggressed in the position of the aggressor. "Time's slipping on too; shall I offer you some luncheon before I bother you about my business?"

His hand is on the bell to ring and order it, but I stop him. Food would choke me at this juncture.

"No, thank you, I'm not hungry. Tell me your business." I try to speak coldly, but cold accents have about as much effect on him as chilled shot has on the impenetrable side of a man-of-war.

"'Drink, pretty creature, drink,' then," he says, offering me a glass of sherry. "No? Well, it would make you ill, probably, for it's sweet and hot, and we don't value those

qualities in our sherry as a rule. To come straight to the point, Tim, as the time is short—I want money awfully, and I know you'll let me have it."

"How much?" I ask timidly; for, to tell the truth, it occurs to me that Theo may fancy the whole sum, and in that case, though I shall be scouted for my folly by my family and society, I shall probably let him have it.

He pauses for an instant, and then says—

"Let's see. There's the two hundred I owe you already; let me have eight hundred more—that will make it a cool thousand——"

"Aunt Helen paid me back the two hundred," I say eagerly.

"Did she? Bless her!" he says, with something really like an approach to gratitude and warmth. "Then lend me a thousand straight out, Tim, will you, dear? You can get at it without going to your father, can't you?"

I nod assent. I am too glad, too ready to serve him, but my heart is too full to speak.

"I can never thank you enough, never repay you for the kindness, Tim," he goes on. "It was my right to have had it from that horrible old woman I've married; but she wants to buy my presence, and a show of what she calls decent affection and respect, with her coin. By the way, Tim, I can't help feeling that *you* let me in for that business; your letters were filled with hysterical tributes to her generosity and readiness to part with her money to any deserving object, and I thought it a pity that it should be frittered away upon a number of little cats and dogs, when such a deserving object as myself needed it."

"I think I would rather have seen you dead than married as you are," I say indignantly; "don't accuse me of having had any hand in such an iniquitous union."

"As I had to remark to you on a former occasion, cease, rude Boreas," he laughs.

“And now—excuse the apparent rudeness, but I must remind you that you ought to be getting back to the station. I’ll walk with you.”

CHAPTER X.

DO I DESERVE IT ?

IN order that I may catch my train and reach Ravensbourne at something like a respectable time, we are obliged to walk fast ; but, urgent as is the need for haste, Theo finds time to run in for a minute to speak to Miss Ashton, who apparently spends her life in the garden, for she is sauntering about its glaring little gravel walks now as we pass.

“ Who is Miss Ashton ? ” I ask, when he rejoins me.

“ Rather a nice girl as that class of country girls go,” he replies carelessly. “ Her father is a rich retired tradesman here. She’s good looking, isn’t she ? ”

I concede the fact, but not very heartily. Miss Ashton's good looks are not of an order that appeal to me. I grant that she is tall, lithe, well-formed, and that no fault can be found with her features. But there is no mobility in her face, and the only expression I have seen in her eyes is one of leering interest in Theo Bligh. How Theo, who has loved Claire and been fascinated by graceful Lady Torrens, who satisfies a man's head as well as his heart, can be even temporarily in subjection to the soulless charms of this uninteresting piece of mere animal beauty is perplexing to me.

"She has a handsome head," he goes on, utterly regardless of the depreciation of Miss Ashton which is conveyed in my tone; "a very good-looking head, indeed. Not much in it, you know."

"Why discuss her," I ask.

"Why? Well, for this reason—she's the most interesting object I've seen by the wayside as we have come along; and she's awfully fond of me?"

I am awfully fond of him myself—perilously, idiotically, hopelessly fond of him; but a strong sense of the iniquity on Miss Ashton's part of loving a married man sets in upon me as he speaks.

"Has she been disgracefully imprudent enough to tell you so?" I ask.

"'Pray, goody, please to moderate the rancour of your tongue.' My dear Tim, why should *you* want to monopolize the privilege? She's fond of me, so are you; so are a number of other women. There's no harm in it, and it makes things pleasant for me."

"But you're married," I protest.

"So are several of the other women—that squares it, doesn't it?" he says blithely. "I say, Tim, we're in very good time for the train—settle that matter for me as soon as you can, and say nothing about it, will you?"

Of course I say "Yes" to both his requests, and he proceeds to make the matter of helping him easy to me.

"I won't bother you to come over here again, Tim ; our seeing one another without the saving knowledge that the restraining eye of Mrs. Macpherson is upon us might be bad for us, mightn't it? Dear little Tim, you're just as good as a sister ; who's your man of business ? "

I tell him, "The same as was Sydney Dale's."

"That's all right," he says encouragingly. "He and your father are not on the best terms, I found, when I was staying with poor Syd Dale. Just write to him to-night, Tim, and put it strongly. Make the cheque payable to yourself, not to me—I wouldn't compromise you for the world, dear ; and people might talk if it were known that you were lending me such a sum of money. It's entirely for your sake that I speak."

I am nearly struck dumb by this mark of his consideration, still I manage to say—

"Thanks, Theo, but let them talk." I restrain myself from adding, "No one can think me a greater fool than I think myself."

"Here comes your train," he says, as carelessly as if we were sure to meet again soon, and as if it were no ordinary errand that had brought me over. "I wish you had not come in riding gear; it's bad form for a girl in your position to be going about in this way. You're not a Miss Ashton, remember."

"You say that to teach me to feel that you recognize the difference in our position, and yet you treat her as a friend—you put her on the platform of equality with yourself! You men *are* coarse—some of you!" I exclaim.

"Now, don't go off in that way," he says, as the train puffs up and I bounce into the carriage. "I'm down here on business, and I meet a girl I've met before, and I'm civil to her. Why shouldn't I be civil to her? Give me your hand. Good-bye; how's Claire?"

With the last words the best Theo shows himself. Real feeling flushes his face. I take back this scrap of consolation with

me : his professed love for Claire was not a lie.

I need all the consolation I can scrape together as the train bears me swiftly along to home and confusion. How shall I account for myself if I am questioned? How shall I deport myself under their observation if I am not questioned? How shall I clear myself if it all comes out, without involving Theo? I ask myself these riddles over and over again, and as I run on in the train I can't read them.

The home station at last! I nerve myself to bear the worst, spring out on the platform, meaning to call for Firefly and gallop home without giving myself a moment for further thought, and there stands papa.

"I've brought the brougham up for you, Tim," he says quietly; "I thought you'd find it pleasanter than riding home.

So I step into the brougham, feeling that my character is restored in the eyes of all the station-people, who must have wondered at my going off in such a

dubious and unconventional way in the morning, but feeling much more keenly that I am afraid to be alone with papa.

Despair makes me very desperate. As he seats himself by my side, I turn round and meet his eyes.

"Papa, tell me the worst you think about my going off in such a funny way; tell me at once."

"That your heart has misled your head, Tim," he says quite cheerily; "that some nature far less noble than your own is influencing you, against your better judgment, through your affection. I suppose it's that scamp Bligh—is it?"

"I have seen Theo," I say quietly, though my lips grow stiff.

"Is his wife dead, or dying? Is he trying to sound you about Claire?" papa questions savagely. "He shall never have her, if he crawls from his house of shame up in the Highlands to Ravensbourne on his knees——"

"His wife is quite well, and he only

mentioned Claire to ask how she was," I cry out eagerly. "Papa, don't be too hard on him. He has sinned and he is suffering; he wanted to hear about us all; he knew I was the only one foolish enough to go to him, and so he sent for me."

"Is he staying anywhere near here with his wife?"

"No, he is alone—on business at a place in——. He said I wasn't to tell you where, though."

"Business!" papa repeats sneeringly. He's deluded you with that idea, has he? Well, don't go again, Tim; that's all I have to say now." And as he says it we reach Ravensbourne, and I breathe freely under the conviction that papa hasn't the faintest notion of the real reason of Theo's desire to see me.

But Claire has to be met still, and Claire is a woman who knows Theo as well as I do myself. She spares me during dinner, for we have several guests this evening, and one of them, Cuthbert Dale, is much favoured

by my father as an aspirant to the hand of Claire. But when we are sauntering about in the moonlight on the lawn, knocking about the croquet balls, she says—

“Did you enjoy your trip to-day, Tim?”

I can answer this question truthfully, at any rate; I say “No” emphatically.

She comes and links her arm within mine, and leads me off from the others.

“Poor dear Tim!” she says softly.

“What a victim you are! I won’t ask to whom you went or why you went, dear; I seem to know all about it without asking. I’ll only say one thing: is he in trouble?”

“His marriage naturally makes him wretched,” I say extenuatingly.

“Don’t you believe it, Tim; *nothing* makes Theo wretched but want of money, and surely he has plenty of that now?”

“How can I tell you about his private affairs?” I say evasively. “He seems wretched—well, not that exactly, but reckless and regardless of consequences; and being these things, he must be wretched.”

Claire laughs.

"That's your reasoning, is it? Why, Tim, he was reckless and regardless of consequences when he made love to you and me at the same time, but I don't think he was a bit 'wretched;' he leaves all the wretchedness to be done for him by his friends. I am glad I'm past that phase; I can never feel anything about him again. But I'm glad that he only wanted to see you to-day to throw a halo of romance over his position. I was afraid he wanted to regain a friendly footing at Ravensbourne, and while I am mistress he shall not come here."

I repeat her sentence: "While you are mistress?"

"Yes. It may not be for long; I haven't the art of wearing the willow gracefully. Cuthbert Dale isn't *quite* as dear a fellow as poor Syd was, but he reminds me of Syd, and it's good to be reminded of something honest, and manly, and true. It will end in my going to Dalesmeet—if he's pertinacious enough."


I look at my sister and admire her for her sense. After all, why should she waste her life on an idea, and that idea so untrustworthy a one as Theo—especially now that Theo is a married man, and to think of him is sin, and shame, and social degradation? I respect Claire for her resolution, but I know I couldn't follow her example.

She is not put to the test yet awhile. Cuthbert Dale is a young man who acts with the greatest deliberation; and though he pursues his suit steadily, he is in no haste to proffer it. He evidently desires to be sure of his ground—to be more certain than he is at present of Claire being genuine. She leads him on, and flatters him so prettily, that I wonder how he can withstand the temptation to claim her “for his Queen of Love” before all the world. But perhaps he knows something of his brother's story, and may fear that she is fooling him too.

The little business matter between Theo and myself has been settled very satisfac-

torily and privately as far as the transfer of the money to him is concerned, and he has even begun to pay me heavy interest for it—which is too noble of him, I think, as not a word had been said about interest when the loan was made. I receive business letters from his lawyers regularly, but from himself I hear nothing, and I begin once more to think of him as one who has passed out of my life for ever.

After all, there is a great deal of happiness in my life. The twins are both fully and fairly engaged to gentlemen who need not be more exhaustively described here than as most “excellent matches, and admirable young men.” One is a wealthy rector; the other, the equally wealthy squire of his parish. They have hunted in couples ever since their boyhood, and now they come courting together, and agree to be united in holy wedlock on the same day; and I believe it would be perfectly immaterial to either of them which of the twins he married. Altogether domestic happiness.



reigns supreme at Ravensbourne, and it is not in my nature to be antagonistic to an order of things which makes other people so perfectly happy.

I am getting well accustomed to the discipline of rising up each morning and not expecting the day to bring forth anything specially pleasant to me, when I am upset again by a request from Mrs. Macpherson that I will go up and stay with her in her own house, amidst the pine-trees and strong blasts which surround and sweep about the hold of the Macpherson.

“You are the only person I can think of who can give me comfort. I am a foolish and unhappy woman, and I care not to be alone, and dare not have any one but you here,” she writes.

Am I worthy of her trust? Do I deserve it?

CHAPTER XI.

CAIRNHOLME.

THE journey has been a trying one to me, both physically and mentally. It is a long one, and I am not quite as strong as of old, and it has been a harrowing one, for its solitariness has enabled me to have a long and undisturbed interview with recollection. But now, after a three hours' drive through wild, grand, mountain scenery, I arrive at Cairnholme, the Highland home of the Macphersons—the house of which Theo Bligh is master by right of his marriage with its mistress.

Everything has been vividly impressed upon me from the moment of my feeling that I have entered the Macpherson border.

The same grim old man-servant who was with her in London has been sent with the coach to meet me, and at a certain point he gets down from his seat by the coachman, looks in at the window, and tells me, as if it were part of the programme, that "we've now come on our leddie's land." I look out eagerly, curiously—for her property is Theo's—and I see vast heath-covered tracts, dotted with sturdy cattle and brightened by groups of clean-looking sheep, stretching away on every side. All is Theo's, by right of his marriage with the lady of the land. How I hate this bit of hardy Scotland, as this view of it first dawns upon me.

The road winds away into a dell at last, shows signs of culture, and presently is barred by a gate before it passes along between two thickly grown rows of pines. Sheeny silver firs, ladylike larches, and rowan berries mix themselves up together, and form a lovely late summer picture; and suddenly we emerge from the shade of the trees, and pull up in front of a big

porch, under the eaves of which I see standing Mrs. Macpherson, Aunt Helen, and Laird.

I feel that my face is covered with blushes, as I spring out to meet the dear old friend who has done herself and my judgment of her the wrong by marrying Theo Bligh in her old age. She is not the bright, rosy-faced, elderly woman who met me, some months ago, at the London terminus any longer. The smiles no longer shed themselves sunnily over her lips, nor does tender solicitude beam any more from her watchful, observant eyes. She looks like a disappointed, humiliated woman, as she welcomes me and presses me to her heart. But still there is a little air of pride in her manner, as she turns to lead me into the house, and notices the glance of undisguised, honest admiration which I bestow on the novel scene.

Cairnholme is only a two-storeyed house, and from its exterior I had not been led to expect such a hall as this in which we pause.

It is panelled with pinewood, and its grained roof runs the whole height of the building. The floor is covered with rugs and skins of all kinds; the corners are fitted up with stuffed stags, antlers, and other trophies of the chase. Mild as the weather is down with us in the south, a chill has come into the mountain air, but this is set at defiance by the huge wood fires that are burning on dogs at either end of the hall. Near one of these fires a large round table, covered with a snowy cloth, stands spread with every description of grain and confectionery dainty that is admissible at afternoon tea. As on a former occasion, Mrs. Burnie, the sedate waiting-woman, comes to relieve me of my travelling wraps, and Nannie, the comfortable cat, purrs a welcome to me from the depths of a fat chair. But, unhappy as I was on that former occasion, I can't help feeling still more unhappy now, as I reflect that Theo is master here, and my host; that Aunt Helen is present to watch me; and that Mrs. Macpherson is sad, sorry, and

pitifully conscious of the fall she has had in my estimation.

I make a great struggle to be natural and at my ease. I discourse as volubly as I can to Aunt Helen concerning Ravensbourne and the march of events there, and try to mention as if it were a matter of no moment to anybody that I think "it will be a match between Claire and Cuthbert Dale." I also speak of the great friendship which now exists between Lady Torrens and ourselves, and at the mention of this latter circumstance, I cannot be blind to the fact that Aunt Helen pricks up her ears, and hoists a little signal of interest in her cheeks, in the guise of a blush.

At length I nerve myself to say, "How is your husband?"

It's an awful thing to ask—it's an even more awful thing for me to mention him thus—but I must not call him Theo, and I *can't* call him Mr. Macpherson. It seems to me that it will be wording the price of sin to give him this latter designation. So,

though it makes my tongue ache to call him what he is, Mrs. Macpherson's husband, I brave the pain and do it.

"He's out on the hills schooling a young horse," Aunt Helen replies, as Mrs. Macpherson looks aside with tearful eyes and quivering lips. "There's not much to keep a young man at home ; I mean there's not much to amuse him in an out-of-the way place like this, you see, Tim. I tell Mrs. Macpherson she'd be wise to give up the grandeur, and go to some place where Theo would be able to get *work* to employ his time."

The words are dropped out lethargically from Aunt Helen's lips, but I detect, for all their monotonous cadence, a malicious ring in them. She loves Theo, and is glad that he is wealthy, but—she cannot be lenient to Mrs. Macpherson for having been the means of giving it to him in such a way.

We sit sipping our tea for a few minutes, talking awkwardly and dispiritedly, until at last, happily for me, the thought strikes Mrs.

Macpherson that I may like to see "some of the rooms." As soon as we are in the spacious, airily furnished, and most comfortable-looking drawing-room, away from Aunt Helen, the barrier of reserve breaks down, and my hostess shows me herself in her own honest, true colours.

"I am a wretched woman this day, Tim," she says, "and all through having been such a foolish one that I deserve no pity. I've only one comfort, my dear, and that is that I have saved some better woman than myself from a miserable fate, by marrying a man who hasn't it in him to be grateful, and who loves himself better than all the rest of the world put together."

"I am sorry you're unhappy," I say, as gently as I can; and then I think of Theo's wicked charm, and wonder how she can have dared to marry him.

"It's all deserved, all deserved," she says hastily; "he is young and I am old, my child, and the wickedness and the folly of it are greater than it was when 'twas the

other way with you and Robbie. I saw all the wrong and foolishness then clearly enough, didn't I? and I saved *you* from a fate that would have been as hard for you to bear as *he* finds *his* with me."

There is no anger, only pain and sorrow, in her voice as she speaks of her young, faulty husband. I am touched by her forbearance, in spite of my contempt for her infatuation and my indignation at the result which it has brought about, and so I say—

"A man can't be as unhappy as a woman under such circumstances; he has his liberty, and all sorts of resources that are denied to women."

She looks at me sharply.

"All sorts of resources?" she repeats. "That's what his Aunt Helen, as he calls her, declares I deny to him. I offer him the mastership of the house, and the management of the property—they're offices that Scottish gentlemen have filled with pride; but he just shrugs his shoulders and goes off with that laugh of his without a word, and

I know that all the interest he takes in the place that is so dear to me is the money he gets from it to spend on his own pleasure away from it."

She pauses, and I remember Morwell-in-the-Marsh, his flirtation by the wayside with Miss Ashton, and have no words at command wherewith to answer her. We are standing at one of the windows that open down to the floor as she speaks, looking away down a long vista of loveliness into the very heart of the dell, and I cannot wonder at her resenting his indifference to a place that so abounds in beauty. It is but natural that she should forget that she, in her age and lack of all comeliness, blurs the fairest aspect of the place in his eyes. It is but natural that she should feel hurt and aggrieved that the man whom she has made lord and master over a place that has never owned any other than genuine, legitimate Macpherson sway before, should show himself to be arrogantly indifferent to the honour. It is but natural that she should

feel these things about him, but even as I acknowledge this truth to myself, I look at my poor old friend, and feel that Theo's conduct is natural too.

"He was always restless," I say rather timidly; for I am afraid to offer an apology of the faintest kind for him, in case she may think that I am taking sides against her, his legal wife.

"And he's grown more so since his Aunt Helen came to us," Mrs. Macpherson goes on. "He makes her the excuse for leaving his home and me more than ever. I have Aunt Helen for a companion, he tells me. And she tells me that I can't expect to tie a young man to my apron-string."

The tears are pouring down her sunken cheeks as she speaks. Horrified as I am at the exhibition of the sentimental pain she feels on account of her young husband's neglect, I can't help pitying her. Heavy as her sin against common sense and good taste has been in marrying him, she is being heavily punished for it. I picture the con-

tinual mortifications to which she must be subjected here, under the observation of the old friends and servants who have revered her formerly; I picture his goading indifference to her and her affection and her wishes; and, in spite of my strong sense of the enormity of her folly, I do pity her.

“You will have my companionship, too, now,” I say, as soothingly as I can. “The thought of how good you’ve been to me ought to make you a little tiny bit happy.” Then I venture to ask for Mr. Murray; and I hear, much to my surprise, and—shall I confess it?—a little to my chagrin, that he is well and happy, and going to be married shortly.

“He has chosen well this time, has Robbie,” she says approvingly. “A nice sensible woman she seems to be from her letters, and one with a good bit of money, too. She will appreciate having a kind, good man like Robert to turn to and take counsel of, for she’s a lone woman, and has had

no settled home for years, being fond of travelling."

In my own mind I paint a portrait of the future Mrs. Murray, and it is not a flattering one. She is probably one of those restless old maids who are just sufficiently well off to be able to ravage the well-frequented spots on the Continent in search of their natural prey. I dislike the idea of being succeeded by such a one as this, and I suppose my displeasure is expressed in my face, for she says earnestly—

"Child, never regret that I was wiser for my brother than I have been for myself, and never grudge him a more suitable companion than you would have been. On the journey downhill—— There's the gong for dinner, and his voice in the hall," she adds suddenly, as Theo's light, ringing tones peal out some imperious command; and I notice that her face brightens, and that the hand she has placed on my arm trembles. I feel inclined to stand apart from her, to show her that I cannot countenance her folly. Love

of the romantic or passionate order in a woman of her age and appearance seems to me to be so wildly incongruous a thing, that I can hardly constrain myself to be even contemptuously tolerant to it! For a moment I feel thus; then I banish the feeling, and let only pity for her reign again in my breast, as I think of his false, fair, winsome manner and face, and sweet, subtle tongue! Who can tell how perfidiously he pleaded to her? Who can tell how bewitchingly he beguiled her into believing herself all it suited his purpose to pretend to believe her himself? Who can tell how strongly he mixed the potions which he offered to her love and vanity? Has he not the curse laid upon him of being able to win every woman whose evil fate it is to be thrown in his ruthless path? Have I been so wise in my generation about him that I may dare to sit in the seat of the scornful about her folly?

He comes in, a Scotch bonnet in his

hand, a Scotch plaid over his shoulders, the *beau ideal* of a young Scottish chief, and he tries to do away with embarrassment on my part at once with the words—

“You *are* welcome to these wilds. The wilderness will become a smiling land to us now Tim has come, won’t it? What’s your news from Ravensbourne? Remember, I’ve not seen you since I took upon myself the honourable state of matrimony. Consider how I must be thirsting for information!”

I remember those hours at Morwell-in-the Marsh so vividly as he speaks, that I fear the incidents that occurred as they passed must be photographed in my face. I feel that I am playing a treacherous part to his wife, the woman who trusts me, in tacitly aiding in the concealment he is practising upon her. At the same time, I know well that I should do more harm than good, were I to betray him now. Accordingly, I do violence to all that is honest within me, and respond to his greeting as if it were the first

I had received from him since he became Mrs. Macpherson's husband.

This first evening at Cairnholme is a bitter trial to me in every way. It goes against my sense of right that he should treat the woman whom he has made his wife, the woman by means of whose generosity he is surrounded by the affluence that is so dear to his pleasure-loving soul, with a carelessness that almost amounts to contempt. My cheeks burn as he leaves her remarks (and every one of them betokens anxiety to please him) unanswered, while he rattles away gaily and easily to me. I seem to myself to be aiding and abetting him in this sin of neglecting the unfortunate lady, who is tasting the full, bitter flavour of the sensations of "the woman scorned."

On the other hand, I cannot help despising her for that supine yearning for a word or a look from him which betrays itself in her every glance, sentence, and gesture. At dinner she worries and wearies the servants by the countless directions she gives

them concerning the master, and what they are to request him to eat, drink, and avoid. She calls his attention to numerous dainties which have evidently been ordered because he has at some time or other expressed a liking for them, and he rejects them with contumely, and turns with renewed eagerness and a remark to me after each freshly proffered attention of hers. I am truly and thoroughly miserable, and I acknowledge that I am deservedly so. He is showing himself in the most hatefully selfish colours in my eyes, yet this is not the real reason of my misery. I will try to lighten my consciousness of sin by confessing it. I am still good enough to scorn myself for being here, in the house of the woman who has been a true, wise friend to me, unintentionally filching from her that which she would give her life to gain—the attention, namely, of her husband, of my bane, of the man I love to such a degree that neither crime nor cowardice on his part can alienate my erring heart from him.

CHAPTER XII.

“I WILL BE MASTER, UNDERSTAND!”

I AM infinitely happier this morning. Mr. Macpherson goes out for one of his customary long rides, and I am left alone with Mrs. Macpherson, for Aunt Helen never leaves her room till the luncheon hour. My heart grows lighter the moment I am alone with my old friend, for I feel that she is comparatively happy in my society, while she has it to herself. The knowledge that her husband shares her sentiments spoils all the pleasure she would otherwise derive from me when he is one of us. And I am just enough to acknowledge that it is reasonable she should feel displeasure that such should be the case,

and generous enough to admit that it is only human, only what ninety-nine women out of a hundred would do, to show that displeasure to me, the innocent one.

But now that he, the graceful shadow of whom I am "half-sick," like the Lady of Shalot—the beautiful bone of contention, which has been grabbed at by so many, and secured to her cost by this luckless woman—now that he has gone out, and left us to ourselves, peace settles down upon my spirit; for I begin to fulfil my proper vocation—I begin to be *of use* to Mrs. Macpherson. I listen with interest, I listen "well," to a tale she would shrink from pouring into any other ear. A tale of foolish fondness—"foolish" because she feels the whole time that it wars against nature—of the falling away from her of the friends of her youth and the family of her first husband—of the gradual decline of that power which their respect for her had formerly given her over the servants and retainers who are now witnesses to her

want of influence over the monarch whom she has elected to reign absolutely over her kingdom. She tells me all these things in a desultory, uncertain, almost unwilling way. Still, there is comfort to her in the telling, for she must (as she is a woman) feel that I listen with sorrow, with pity, and above all, with sympathy.

I see my task before me, and I prepare to fulfil it. I am to be the repository of her grievances against Theo, and the fate her own folly has brought upon herself, whenever we are alone. This portion of my burden I can bear. It will be a dead, unpleasant weight, but still I'll be humane enough to take it up for her sake, poor thing! But how about the part which I may have to play towards Theo, when the custom of seeing me daily has taught him to drop into that habit of reliance upon me which has invariably hitherto been developed in him when we have been thrown together?

It is sufficient amusement for me to

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wander about the house during the first part of the day. It is an old time-honoured place, showing evidences of having been in the possession of a race with plenty of wealth at command for generations. The furniture is splendid in a sturdy, substantial way that never aimed at being artistic when it started in life, but that is so now because time has mellowed and coloured it so well, toning down whatever might have been crude and coarse, glaring and too pronounced, fifty or a hundred years ago, into a most harmonious series of pictures. It is congruous enough to think of Theo in the midst of richly carved buffets and escritaires, of heavily embossed shields and flagons and salvers of silver and gold that came originally from the “rare old town of art and traffic.” Thoughts of him do not jar with the billiard-room, or the well-filled stables, or with any of the tangible proofs that are about me that I am in the home of one to whom these luxuries and extravagancies come in the

natural order of things. But the thought of him—and far more the sight of him—does jar with the pictured forms of those brawny, bony, long-armed, high-cheek-boned Macphersons who look down upon me from the walls of every room. The ancestors of her former husband seem to me to follow me with their cold grey eyes wherever I go, and when I face round and try to read the impression those eyes convey, it is invariably one of reproach for my being a passive ally even of the interloper.

I am more and more imbued with a sense of respect for the property, as being the representation of the power of one race, when I go out on to the side of a hill which kindly rises on the north-east side of the house, and look away over miles of moorland, and hear that “It’s all Cairnholme. It’s all mine—ours,” she hastily corrects herself; “the Macphersons have never parted with an acre for five hundred years.”

I am impressed with the statement, and am in a sort of glow of enthusiasm about

the greatness of the clan Macpherson, when Mrs. Macpherson tells me this as we stumble down the hill after my first surveying expedition. It is difficult to avoid this special form of hysteria when a possessor is playing the part of showman to you over possessions which he or she regards as rather superior to any other corner of creation. Walking here with the relict of the last of a race that has held every inch of the land for five hundred years, I find myself balancing and adjusting Theo's claims to consideration far more reasonably and moderately than I have ever succeeded in doing before. I compare his Will-o'-the-wisp nature with that grand tenacity which has kept the Macpherson lands intact.

"They must often have been tempted to sell," I exclaim involuntarily; "is your air up here so pure and good that love of gain can't flourish here?"

"They've all loved the land like a living thing," she says, with a little touch of pride,

"and they must be uneasy in their graves now that——" She pauses and shakes her head, but her sentence seems to finish itself in my ears as Theo comes to meet us from the stables.

His hat is tipped forward over his brow, to protect his eyes from the sun; but no shadow darkens those flickering, false, beautiful eyes as they fall on us, two of the women whose lives he has shaded. He comes forward loungingly, followed by a troop of Gordon setters, soft-eyed collies, and big majestic deerhounds; and I see that Mrs. Macpherson is ready to melt into tears of admiring affection for him, as she sees how lovingly the dogs she loves follow the man who has no heart for her.

His first words are addressed to me.

"What sort of a fellow is Cuthbert Dale, Tim? Is he a safe fellow, like Sydney?"

"I don't think Syd's duplicate is born yet," I say, flushing up with the remembrance of how things are between Claire and Cuthbert Dale.

"I don't want æsthetic tributes to the varied excellences of the loved and the lost," he laughs, wheeling round by my side; "all I want is to be assured of the banking account of the living Dale. He has written about the Hut and the moors," he adds in a careless but still explanatory tone, turning his head to address his wife.

Mrs. Macpherson is compelled to trot in order to keep up with that slinging step of Theo's, which covers so much ground, and which he does not deem it necessary to moderate for our convenience. Trotting takes away her breath, and so she is obliged to pull up before she can reply.

"About the Hut and the moors! What do you mean, Theo?"

"That I'm going to let them," he says airily. "I've been wasting my substance in advertising them in the *Field* for the last six weeks, and at last I've got two decent offers for them. I should like to let Dale have them for auld lang syne and his brother's sake," he adds to me.

I am so saddened by the recollections of Syd which are evoked by his speech, I am so stultified by the idea of the sacrilege he is committing in merely contemplating letting the cherished Macpherson moors, that I don't attempt to answer him. Mrs. Macpherson, however, having recovered her breath, does so.

"But I'll have no Mr. Dale nor Mr. anybody else at the Hut and on my moors for the sake of auld lang syne or any money they may offer," she says angrily. "You should have told me this before, Theo. If 'twas money you wanted, you should have had it—have I ever refused it to you?—and if you wanted to disgrace me in the eyes of the people of the man whose name you've condescended to take, you've done that so well already that you might surely rest satisfied with your work, and not want to bring fresh witnesses of my folly to my very threshold."

If it is an ill-advised, infuriated, incoherent speech, nevertheless I don't wonder

at her having been goaded into making it, as I mark his utter *insouciance*, his supreme disregard of her and her feelings in every way.

"Now, pray, none of that nonsense," he protests, appealing to her as if he really had put up with more of her whims already than mere mortal man could be expected to endure. "Whenever the matter of money is mooted, Mrs. Macpherson's nationality comes to the fore, and she 'fears I'm going to be incautious;' and whenever I propound a scheme for raising the wind, she's afraid I'm going to mulct 'the family' of one of their hardly held acres; so between the two fears I come rather badly off, you'll observe, Tim."

Her poor anxious, unhappy face grows plainer by reason of that very anxiety and unhappiness of which he is the cause.

"You have never found any difficulty about money, Theo," she says gently, and there is such a profound sense of having deserved all the humiliation he can put

upon her, that I "suffer" more than ever on account of her position and the probability of his taking advantage of it. I am getting to know him so well as such a thoroughly heartless fellow, that I believe myself to be prepared for the worst, the wildest statements he can make. Nevertheless, well-prepared as I delusively suppose myself to be, he staggers, hurts, wounds, *outrages* me by his next remark.

"I was going to tell you, when you interrupted me," he says sparkingly, swaying himself towards her in order that she may catch his words distinctly and have no doubt as to their meaning—"I was going to tell you, that though feeling prompts me to give this man Dale, the Vincents' friend, the preference, interest (the genuine motive power of my life) counsels me to take the offer of a man called Ashton. Ashton's a snob, but he has plenty of money, and he'll keep things going at the Hut, and get such a lot of fellows about him that there will be no difficulty in managing the matter another year."

I anticipate an outbreak from Mrs. Macpherson in response to this; rather to my surprise, she listens to him quietly. All she says is—

"*I must know something about this man whom you call a 'snob,' even while you want to plant him at your gates, Theo. Who is Mr. Ashton? Is he some wild young fellow you're bringing up here to back you up in whatever course of life seems pleasantest to you?*"

"Hear her!" he says contemptuously. "Was there ever such irrational and absurd opposition offered to a fellow before! Ashton is a man who has made more money than he knows how to spend in trade; he has heard that it's the right thing to have a moor, and so he's ready to pay highly for the privilege. Dale would be quite a different fellow to deal with; but with Ashton at the Hut, I shall feel as if the place were entirely in my own hands still."

"It would give me pain — worse than

that, it would give the friends I have left to me still a worse impression of you than they have already," she interrupts with trembling lips. "Keep the moors in your own hands still—don't let the Hut—have as many of your friends as you please here to stay with you and shoot with you; let me have my way in this for once."

He answers with his boyish, heartless laugh, and the words—

"I will be master here, understand! It's not a woman's province to manage these outdoor matters, even when she is endowed with the wisdom of years and experience which are your portion. I've decided Ashton shall be the man. I could hardly have Dale at my gates, if he came accompanied by Claire—could I, Tim?"

I look at him angrily, reproachfully—that is to say, I try to do so, but his winning, pleading glance meets mine and disarms me; and as we near the entrance to the house he backs up these mute, but potent, supplications with even more potent words, uttered in a whisper—

"I WILL BE MASTER, UNDERSTAND!" 191

"Let my wife go in alone, Tim ; you're the only friend I have in the world, and I'm going to tax your friendship now." Then aloud he adds—

"I'm going to take Tim to show her the horses. You never care for the stable round—do you, Mrs. Macpherson?—so we'll say good-bye to you for an hour or two."

He saunters away, leaving us two women standing together in uncertainty. I long to obey him and go with him ; I long to have some fresh demand made upon the love and forbearance I feel for him. But how will " his wife " (he needn't have called her that ; he needn't have reminded us both that she has the highest claim upon him, and that he holds that claim in the very lowest estimation)—how will his wife regard the fact of my doing so ? It will be like ranging myself on his side against her position as the wife and mistress here ; it will be holding up my hand in favour of his election as lord and master absolutely without appeal ; above all, it will be like myself

to try and please him at any cost to everybody else, myself included.

"Go with him, Tim," she says. "Don't let him have this to accuse me of, that I grudge him the society of those who can interest him as I can never hope to do : go with him, Tim."

I obey her, and follow him to the entrance of a winding walk, bordered with high thick shrubs, which leads away to the stable yard. A garden seat is planted midway down the little winding walk, and on this he reclines while he lights his cigar. When he has satisfactorily accomplished this feat, he says to me—

"Our little expedition to Morwell-in-the-Marsh must be kept dark from the old lady—you understand that, don't you, Tim?"

"It seems to me that everything you do has to be kept dark from somebody or other," I grumble.

"No, now really, that's taking an exaggerated view of my amiable foibles," he answers good-humouredly. "As I've told

you before, it wouldn't be a good thing for you, for it to get blown about that you had met me there by appointment, unknown to your family and friends. I don't care for myself, but Mrs. Macpherson would make Cairnholme rather hot for you, if she suspected anything of the sort."

"There was nothing dishonourable in my being there, Theo," I half plead, half assert. "I went there to befriend, if possible, a man whom I once thought would have been my brother: was my aid of use?"

I say this more with the hope of turning the subject and taking his thoughts away from Morwell-in-the-Marsh than with any other design. But apparently the diversion is not pleasing to him, for he starts up with the scowl that is too apt now to cloud his once always bright, careless face, and says—

"Don't revert to the money, please, Tim. It's disagreeable enough for a fellow to owe it to a woman, I can assure you, and I'd have lost the best chance I've ever had of fortune rather than have borrowed it of you,

if I hadn't made sure of being able to repay it almost directly; but you see what Mrs. Macpherson is. My only chance of raising the sum unknown to her will be to let the moors, and do a little horse-dealing with Ashton."

I ask the question I have been longing to ask him since the first mention was made of the Hut and its probable tenant—

"Is the Miss Ashton you were speaking to when I went to you at Morwell-in-the-Marsh any relation to this man?"

"His daughter."

I have anticipated the answer, nevertheless it stuns me. However direfully we may dread baseness developing in those we love, the shock is none the less when it does develop.

No further word is spoken between us till we enter the stables, when, as I stand patting one of his beautiful horses and thinking how much nobler this powerful, gentle beast is than the man who owns him, he mutters—

"I have trusted you with a secret because you asked me for it; I charge you, on your honour as a gentlewoman, not to betray it."

"And in return I charge you, on your honour as a gentleman, to take your wife to call on Miss Ashton as soon as she comes to the Hut. The girl, not knowing you're married, may get to care for you to her misfortune."

"Not unlikely," he answers carelessly. "Well, as you make a point of it, I'll take my wife. But I tell you what, Tim, I'll keep you from the Hut; Miss Ashton, not being a thoroughbred, might betray surprise or emotion at seeing you, and then the little tale which I have a terror of being unfolded for your sake solely, would tell itself."

"I've no desire to go," I say, drearily following him into another stall and patting the glossy sides of another gentle, generous creature. "I only want Miss Ashton to know your true position. It's not the action of a thoroughbred to have deceived her, whether she is one herself or not."

“When I have sold my horses to the old cad at my own price, the Ashton family may return to their native marshes at their earliest convenience. Until my horses are sold, it will be my object to make life at the Hut as delightful to every member of the Ashton family as possible. Now you know all about it, Tim, it's not a very nefarious or immoral scheme, is it?”

I question myself seriously as to whether anything he ever does, or ever has done, has been the reverse of these qualities; but I think silence the better part, and my silence annoys him.

“Cairnholme seems to have stultified your faculties; you used to be as amusing a companion as a man could have. Do you remember the day by the otter-pool?”

Do I not remember it!

“I was a better fellow then than I am now,” he goes on more seriously. “Well, come back to my bonnie bride, Tim; we don't seem to hit it off together as well as we did in that time of roses. It's a bargain about the Hut.”

It has been a horribly unsatisfactory *tête-à-tête* for me, for he himself has painted a few fresh traits in his character in even darker colours than I had ever seen them in before. It is hard, therefore, to detect, as I do when I go back to the house, that Mrs. Macpherson seems to think that I have had sunshine enough for one day, and accordingly glooms at me in a way that, by reason of my sore and sorry state, makes me feel that mean injustice is the strongest characteristic trait of the majority of my fellow-creatures. She it was who had weighted the beam and sent me over into the peril of that quiet promenade with him. If she could only know how unhappy he has made me by his callousness to every consideration that I hold dear, she would surely be kinder.

CHAPTER XIII.

TO THE RESCUE.

I HAVE been at Cairnholme three weeks, and the futility of my visit becomes more apparent to me hourly. I am no comfort, as she hoped and said I should be, to the woman who has quitted the tower of strength in which she was placed by her wealthy and respected widowhood, for the uncertain footing afforded her in her new position of not only unloved, but utterly neglected and despised, wife. She shrinks from my observation—my poor old friend who has sought to purchase indemnity from suffering for violating Nature's laws, and all her gold has failed to do it; and, though all my heart aches for her, I can but acknow-

ledge the grim justice of Nature's unvarying decree.

"Gay youth loves gay youth."

I recall these words of Owen Meredith's, and as I think of the good-looking Miss Ashton who is coming and the elderly, podgy Mrs. Macpherson who is present, I tremble for Theo's fair fame before the world; for intuition teaches me that he will continue to deceive the girl into the belief that he is free and unmarried, if it be possible for him to do it.

In spite of all my fears, time will not stand still; and so the day dawns which brings to us at Cairnholme the tidings that the Ashtons have arrived at the Hut. The intelligence is conveyed to Theo in a brief, business-like note from Mr. Ashton, to the following effect:—

"SIR,

"This is to inform you that I have taken up my residence at the Hut, and that

I shall be happy to see you whenever you like to bring your gun and have a day's sport.

“Yours obediently,

“JOHN ASHTON.”

Theo reads the letter aloud, and laughs over the manner of it, while his wife perceptibly winces at the matter. Presently she speaks.

“Has the man brought a family with him, or is he a bachelor?” she asks.

“He didn't go into those details when he offered to become my tenant,” Theo says gaily. “I can only say, if he has brought a family with him, that they'll have to camp out on the moors. The Hut's a sweet place, but rather cramped.”

I tingle; my intuitions are correct; Theo is going to continue his game of deception, and I have not the courage to unmask him. I have not the courage—so much is certain. Am I sure that I have the wish?

About eleven o'clock he orders out a

string of horses, and directs that they are to be taken over to the Hut. There has been a *soupçon* of truth in his statement, after all ; he does hope to do something in the horse-dealing way with Mr. Ashton. I grow absolutely hopeful about the future, as I suffer my mind to revel in the luxury of the new delight of finding him veracious.

“ Shall you call on the Ashtons ? ” I venture to ask timidly of Mrs. Macpherson in a day or two ; and she shakes her head and answers—

“ Theo only speaks of ‘ Mr. Ashton,’ my dear ; he has made no mention of ladies, so I conclude there are none ; why should I call ? ”

“ Ask him if there are any,” I say boldly. “ If there are, it looks unneighbourly on your part to hold aloof from them. Surely you won’t do such a wrong, even in seeming, to your Scotch pride of hospitality.”

“ It’s his object to ingratiate himself with Mr. Ashton, for he wants good prices for his horses,” she says, with concentrated

bitterness. "If there were ladies, he would make me show them courtesy. My dear, I needn't ask him if there are any."

She foils me herself, when I am trying to work for her weal. I cannot bear it, so this day at 'dinner I say, looking him innocently in the face—

"Has Mr. Ashton a wife or daughters with him?"

He gives me back a gay glance; nothing discomposes him.

"No wife—only a daughter," he says. "Oughtn't you to call on her, by the way?" he adds abruptly, addressing Mrs. Macpherson.

"If you wish me to do it, but I see no necessity for the performance of such a penance," she replies.

"Well, as you like; send your card—that will be enough. I shall go over there to-morrow, and I'll convey it with your compliments, if you'll allow me."

She accedes to his proposition, and he looks at me and laughs at my obvious discomfiture.

"You do try your utmost to explode me," he says to me in the evening. "How is it, Tim, that, clever as you are, you can't do it."

"Because you're meaner than I am," I say bluntly; "we don't fight with the same weapons."

He gives me credit for a greater amount of talent the following morning, when he is about to depart for the Hut in his dog-cart. I have obtained Mrs. Macpherson's permission to go over and deliver her card to Miss Ashton, and so, just as Theo is about to start, I say as carelessly as I can—

"Tell Miss Ashton that I am going to call on her to-day as Mrs. Macpherson's representative."

He stands still, one foot on the step of the dog-cart, the reins in his hands, and he withdraws the inevitable cigar from his lips.

"You are?"

"I am."

"Nonsense! Why should you? She'll

remember—— As you please, though. A wilful woman will have her way, however unpleasant that way may be to her. Miss Ashton won't be at home, in the first place; she drives out with the luncheon, and when once she gets with the guns, she's in no hurry to leave them. She's a determined young woman, is Miss Ashton, and doesn't stick at trifles."

"If you tell her your wife's representative is coming to call on her, as I ask you to do, she'll hardly have the incivility to go out," I say.

He smiles.

"Well, Tim, the drive's a pleasant one, at any rate. I can't make myself responsible for Miss Ashton, of course; nor can I presume to attempt to regulate her movements. Good-bye; I'm rather late," and he springs into the dog-cart and drives off, leaving me dissatisfied with him, Miss Ashton, circumstances, and above all—oh, above all—with myself.

"You are a good girl to take so much

trouble for the sake of keeping up my character as gentlewoman in the opinion of these people," Mrs. Macpherson says to me affectionately, when I am about to depart on my self-appointed mission. "I can trust the telling of the right thing about me to you, Tim. I couldn't see the place habited by strangers."

"You'll let me ask Miss Ashton to come over here, won't you?" I plead, for I do long for Miss Ashton to realize the whole truth.

Little red spots blaze up in Mrs. Macpherson's cheeks at once.

"You heard what Theo called the father," she replies; "is it likely that the daughter of such a man as he described would be in place as a visitor at Cairnholme?"

"Very likely, indeed," I say eagerly. "Her father is rich—don't you think that he has taken care to surround her with all those external refinements which tend to refine a woman's nature? Remember, she is alone here; be kind to her."

"She is not likely to care for the kindness of an old, neglected, despised woman," she says, with angry energy. "No, Tim, my dear; probably Theo has painted such a picture of his wife that Miss Ashton pities him and loathes me. No, Tim; I will make no further advances to the Ashtons."

I dare not tell her the strong reason there exists for her facing the Ashtons, and proclaiming herself to be what she is—Theo's wife. So I withdraw for a while from this weary game of expostulation which I am for ever playing with her, and go away to my first fencing match with Miss Ashton.

It is a splendid drive along the roads which intersect the lofty hills that lie between Cairnholme and the Hut. I have no very great hopes of achieving an interview with Miss Ashton, for probably Theo will do the very thing he ought not to do, and win her in some indefinable way to go out and avoid me. Still, I may do some good; so I go on in hope, and enjoy the scenery.

I have been warned that the distance is long between Cairnholme and the Hut—"something like eight miles as the crow flies"—but I am unprepared to find it as long as it is in reality; for the road winds in and out among the hills, and prolongs itself in the wild, lovely mountain passes, until I tell myself in my impatience that, even if I find Miss Ashton at home, I shall have no time to say more to her than "Good morning" and "Good-bye," if I wish to regain Cairnholme before the shades of nightfall.

At last I reach the Hut; and in answer to my almost eager inquiry for her, I am told that Miss Ashton is in. In another moment I am face to face with the young lady who, in my estimation, is either despicable as a lure, or to be pitied as a dupe.

A gleam of something like recognition crosses her face as she comes to meet me; a puzzled expression follows it. She evidently cannot completely identify me

with the girl who went to see Theo at Morwell-in-the-Marsh; and small marvel that it should be so, for my sorrow is of stronger growth and greater age now, and it is telling upon me. Just as I am thinking this, and being glad of it—for I do not want her to conjecture about or question me—her eyes fall on that golden-red hair of mine, and she remembers me perfectly.

“What odd places we meet in!” she says. “First on a rink where, out of all the hundreds who were there, yours is the only appearance I can recall; then at my own dear little village home in Essex; and now up in the Highlands. Are you staying in the neighbourhood?”

She is perfectly quiet, self-possessed, and polite. In spite of everything, I am rather prepossessed with her.

“I am staying at Cairnholme——”

“At Mr. Macpherson’s place?” she interrupts, and her face works rather nervously.

Ah! do I not know the feeling well which

causes it so to work? She shrinks from the thought of even a possible rival near the throne of her king.

"I am staying with Mrs. Macpherson; I am the bearer of her cards and compliments," I say, as cheerfully as I can under the circumstances, which are depressing me out of all hopefulness as to good resulting from my visit.

She glances at the cards, which are lying by her on a monkey-table, trifles with them nervously for a moment or two, and then says—

"Is Mrs. Macpherson too old or infirm to drive out?"

"Oh dear, no!" I reply with energy; "she's activity itself."

"But not even the spirit of activity which possesses her is strong enough to bring her from Cairnholme to the Hut," she says, with a slight forced laugh. "I am sorry for it. Papa is absurdly sensitive on the subject of any slight being offered to me, and I'm afraid he will take this as a slight, and

perhaps be annoyed with Mr. Macpherson about it."

"It is a long drive," I say apologetically; "and, moreover, Mrs. Macpherson has a little feeling still about this place having been let. I've no doubt she will get over it in time, and then you will find her what I do—one of the kindest of women and warmest of friends."

She looks at me uneasily again, and asks—

"Have you known her long and intimately? Have you known her son long?"

The moment has come for the thunderbolt to fall on this poor girl's innocent, unhappy head. My voice trembles with real pity for her, as I reply—

"She has no son. Yes, I have known her for several months, and we have both passed through such trouble that we have become very intimate."

"No son! Who, then, is Theo?"

"Her husband. Hasn't he told you?"

She stands up, her slight, graceful figure

absolutely swaying under the cruel pain this weighty blow is giving her, and I dare not try to comfort her. For a few moments she stands covering her face with her hands, then she lets them fall, and says brokenly—

“Pray don’t think that Mr. Macpherson has made any false statements, or even deceived us voluntarily; but he has always spoken of her as Mrs. Macpherson, and I knew she was old. I have been the one to blame all through. I took no interest in any human being but Theo himself, and I suppose I ought to feel that I am rightly punished; but my father will be more than angry, and in his anger he is apt to be so hard and unjust, that my life will be a very wretched one.

My own life is a very wretched one, but I have grown accustomed to the wretchedness of it. This poor girl’s misery is so very young a thing, that I can but treat it tenderly. Moreover, I am touched by her generosity. She has been duped, wronged, led on to love where no love may be honour-

ably paid back to her, and still she tries to spare the man who has done it—still she will have him held blameless if she can.

I say one or two words that are utterly inadequate to the occasion, and prepare to take my leave. As she holds my hand at parting, some instinct teaches her to trust me.

“You will never let him know that the intelligence affected me as it has done,” she says, with quivering lips; “and you won’t betray the concealment he has practised—it has been nothing worse than that, you know—to his wife?”

I give her the promise she asks for, and go back to Cairnholme with such a craving for rest in my soul, that I fancy I must be suffering from premature old age: youth can surely never be so intensely weary as I am.

Theo is neither cast down nor angry when he comes in, rather earlier than usual, this evening. He tells us, as carelessly as if it

were a matter of no moment to him, that Mr. Ashton has "backed out of the purchase of the horses"—has "made up his mind to leave the place, as he finds he is no sportsman, and his daughter finds it intolerably dull ;" and that they have come to a mutual understanding, by which he (Theo) has it all in his own hands again, even for the remainder of this season. There is clearly no animus in his heart against me as he tells us all this, even though he is the loser through my zeal. There is good in Theo, perverted though it be. I feel a trifle less weary as I think this.

It is not for two or three days after my visit to Miss Ashton that he finds an opportunity of saying to me—

"I wish you had deferred your call for a few days, till I had landed the money for the horses. Old Ashton fell into the pardonable error of believing that I meant to ask his daughter to be the lady of the land. He's very savage, and thinks I've behaved ill. However, 'all's well that ends well.

The Hut will be vacated the sooner for the occurrence of the little mistake ; and Mrs. Macpherson, consequently, will be better pleased."

"I hope it will all end well. Theo, I wonder what would be the best ending for you ? "

And he shakes off my sympathy by saying—

"Freedom ; but I shall never find it, I'm afraid."

CHAPTER XIV.

GOING HOME.

I AM home again, hearing of great and astounding changes that are coming to my own people at Ravensbourne. As I listen to them with loving interest, something in the looks of those who are telling me of them apprises me of the fact that a greater change has been wrought in me than any of which they can inform me.

They are happy changes of which I hear ; there “ comes a sound of wedding bells ” as I listen to them. Mabel and Magdalen are to be married with much pomp, on the same day, a fortnight hence ; and a week later papa and Lady Torrens are going to take

each other "for better and for worse" in a quieter way.

"She'll be a darling stepmother," Claire says, turning to kiss Lady Torrens, who is leaning over me as I lie on the sofa; "only you and I will be left to bother her, Tim, and I expect we shall bother her for the remainder of our lives."

I smile in response to this, and I feel that I smile very feebly. My day is done, I know that very well, and they all know it for me; but Claire is in all the glory of her beauty still. Claire, in the order of things, will go out to add to all that is good and gracious and beautiful in some other family. Claire will surely reward the Dales for their fidelity by marrying Cuthbert.

I suppose I look all this, for, though I do not speak a word, Claire answers the unspoken thought.

"Tim, dear Tim!" she says caressingly, "our earthly idol is broken, but we both love him still: you with such resignation, such perfect renunciation of him, that your

folly will surely be forgiven; I with anything but resignation—in fact, with a most faulty hope.”

She says these last words in a very low, remorseful kind of voice, and neither Lady Torrens nor I care to ask her the reason why.

Winter passes away, and the changes have taken place, and have become such established facts that I sometimes have the feeling that the present order of things has been going on all my grown-up life. It is as though it had never been otherwise, when my two married sisters and their husbands come to dine with us, and she who was Lady Torrens takes the head of the table as Mrs. Vincent. The only change that never ceases to puzzle me is in myself; hour after hour, day after day, week after week, I lie on the sofa in my stepmother's boudoir—lie here listlessly, aimlessly; reading sometimes, but far oftener doing nothing but suffer the pain of utter weakness and weariness.

A chill has settled in my system, the doctors say, and I am ordered to "lie up" and recruit my strength during these winter months, in order that I may come out as good as new in the spring. My two married sisters tell me (in confidence) that their respective husbands have told them (in confidence) that I am "a very foolish girl to cherish a fruitless affection for a worthless scamp like Theo, and that by doing so I nourish an illness which might otherwise be shaken off." They are very sensible men, and I acknowledge their sensibleness, and my sisters' kindness in repeating their improving advice, but my gratitude does not give me the power to follow it. I do not "cherish" an affection for the "worthless scamp;" my affection for him is a hardy, strong plant, that stands in no need of care and culture. It is a love that is real and true—"a love that ne'er rose to passion, nor to passion's sure decay"—a love that is bound up with my being—a love that has never been shaken or weakened, shadowed

or defiled, by any rival—a love that will surely, some day or other, plead with Theo for himself.

Winter is passing — has passed, and Spring's bright glances are bent upon us without intermission. Everything seems waking up into new life. The fern fronds in the window-garden burst their earth-bonds, and in their vigorous strength and beauty compel me to look forward with anxious delight to the day when they shall be full-grown luxuriant plants. Heartless and Music are happy and useful, for otter-hunting has set in with enthusiasm in our neighbourhood, and the two good old hounds are still unmatched in our countryside for keenness, courage, and prowess. Lily and Claire "get up" wonderful archery costumes. Picnics are organized by every one we know—and still I lie here, wondering why I do it, and unable to do anything else.

The beauty of everything in nature grows upon me with such intensity that I strive

to gather in as much of it as is possible, and to clasp it to myself so closely that we can never be quite parted. I cling to beautiful thoughts in books; I steep myself in the fragrance of the beautiful flowers with which the thoughtful love of those around me fills my room; I gaze at Claire's ripening loveliness until my eyes swim in tears and a halo surrounds her, and I almost fancy my darling sister is an angel already. The dogs seem to grow fonder of me; they flop their kind old heads down on the pillow by my side, and give vent to little grunts of affection whenever they come into the room. And as for papa, I seem to be more to him than ever, in spite of the constant presence of his beautiful wife. He seems unwilling to leave the house, for ever so short a time, and interrupts himself in his beloved writing perpetually to run up and ask if there is anything he can do or get to amuse Tim.

Snowdrops and hypanthids give place to violets and primroses, and these again

vanish and are replaced by the roses and lilies of June. I love this summer weather more than I ever loved it in my life before. It reminds me of those glowing, gorgeous days when Theo first came to us—of the days when my love was a young, fresh, happy, pure thing—of the days when I went through life with a bound, I was so full of vigorous health and spirits.

How changed I am—how entirely altered! I see them go out two or three times a week—a great gathering of them—to the otter-pool, where they pleasantly mix up sport with picnic, after the fashion I know so well—the fashion I have been accustomed to since I was a tiny child; and, to my own surprise, I have no desire to join the merry group, or rather the group that would be so merry were it not that the thought of my listless, lazy state damps it. Is it listlessness and laziness only, though? I begin to think that it is something else—something that I cannot combat, something that we must all face

sooner or later, and that I shall be called upon to face very soon.

I realize the truth : I am dying.

How they will all grieve for me, and how hard it will be for me to tell them the truth that I am glad that I am going home ! May God, in his goodness, grant happiness to Claire and Theo !

CHAPTER XV.

TRUE TO ONE FOR EVER!

I, CLAIRE, take up the pen my sister Tim laid down six months ago, with a full sense of my unworthiness to complete the story of her life of self-abnegation. The last words she wrote were words of tender, loving hope for Theo and for me.

Mine is a difficult task, but it is self-assigned; and, having commenced, I will not shrink from it, nor will I seek to avert criticism by offering apologies, or putting forth painful and perplexing circumstances as a plea for leniency being extended to me. It is my wish and will, not my pleasure, to tell out the tale of my sister's unselfish-

ness, and in doing so I must portray the selfishness of myself and another.

It was the time of roses when she died, the brightest, most glorious season of the year—the same season as when Theo came among us first ; and she, the brightest, most glorious flower of the family, faded just as the roses came to perfection.

How wildly we clung to her during those last awful hours ! How we tried to hold her back from Death for a while, until all in a moment we felt the full force of his terrible power, and understood all the puny insignificance of our futile efforts to thwart him ! It was such agony to see her ebbing away, knowing how powerless we were to save her, that there were moments when I prayed for the end—that the agony might come to a climax. When the end did come, there seemed to be no light in heaven or earth for me, and my sorrow was dry-eyed. *I* had no tears to shed.

What a blank it was, when what had been Tim was taken away and lowered to


the bottom of that ghastly deep grave ! While she was lying in her coffin, in the room that will always be a hallowed spot to us all, with a sweet look of rest and peace on her face, I seemed to hold communion with her still, and hardly felt as if my sister and I were parted for ever in this world. But when my longing gaze followed the flowers into that terrible pit, then the woefulness of it all came upon me, and I knew that Tim was gone.

Those flowers ! How they will always be associated in my mind henceforth with death and despairing misery ! Crosses of lilies of the valley, crowns of the roses Tim loved so dearly, white Eucharistic and arum lilies, and delicate azaleas, covered her in her coffin, steeping all that remained of her in an atmosphere of such fragrance and purity as befitted my darling.

That flower-covered bier ! I shall see it all the days of my life. Flowers must love death, otherwise they could not have remained blooming, beautiful, and fragrant as

they did while clustering round Tim's marble cold form, during all the days that intervened between the hour she died and that woefully blank one when she was carried out of our dear old home for ever.

Time has toned down the circumstances that were so vividly, gleamingly painful and distinct that day. There was pathos and anguish in everything—pain in the faces of the sympathetic friends who came about us to show, with that sweet instinct of humanity which such times call forth, that, though they recognized our claims to greater grief, it was reflected in their hearts—pain in the sight of the rooms she had inhabited, of the dogs she had petted, of the horses she had ridden—pain in blooming flowers and foliage, whose ripening and decay would not be witnessed by her; and such pathos and agony in the sound of the suppressed sobs that burst from the crowd of our humbler friends, when our sorrowful, broken family band passed through it from the church to the churchyard, and



all around realized that all that was human of her was blotted out from our circle for ever.

“ A dreary thought, yet human too,
For love is not the soul's alone :
It winds around the form we view,
The mortal we have known.
With these the ‘ human,’ human love
Will weave its thoughts and share its doom,
And still confound the life above
With death beneath the tomb.”

That Theo was there, uninvited, looking ill and unhappy to a degree that would have been deemed impossible by those who only knew him in his brighter, better days, and that his was the last hand that showered down pure white blossoms into her grave, was the one gleam of light to me in that dark day. Surely her prayer for him will be heard, and her unrewarded fidelity will some day or other plead with his better nature for himself, and will not plead in vain. During these six months that have passed since that sad sultry day, when he betrayed the best and most manly feeling

of his life over that early grave, up to the present time, we have heard nothing of him. He, too, is blotted out ; and when Lily and I talk of him, as we do occasionally, it is always as if he and all interest attaching to him were things that belonged entirely to a past that can never be resuscitated.

Papa has changed into an old man quite suddenly, but Lily, his wife, does not seem to like him the less for the change. "There must be a taint in the nature that is not altered by the death of a child," she says. "It's in the order of things that the parents shall go home first ; and when, in our own individual cases, that order is reversed, we must be callous indeed if we don't feel that we must have offended a merciful God deeply to have been so heavily punished." Poor papa ! Tim, of all his children, was the dearest ; she was his idol. He believed her to be capable of making any intellectual effort, and saw in her a possibility of his own mental power being reflected in such a way, some day or other, as would have

redounded to his own honour. Now that she has gone before him, all the frivolity and want of high motive, all the idleness and vanity and uselessness of the class of writing to which he has devoted his life and talents, come home to him. When he takes up the pen it is that of an unready writer ; and fictitious joys and woes stand a poor chance of faithful portrayal at the hands of one who has only lately learnt to know what sorrow really is, and who has been taught the lesson by being bereaved of an adored child.

It is a black, bitter January morning. The side of my face which is towards the fire burns fiercely ; for the fire is composed of blazing logs, which throw out an immense amount of heat, and yet fail to warm the room. Lily and I are wrapped up in furs, and declaring to each other that no consideration for the necessity of exercise, as a matter of health, will induce us to leave the house to-day. Suddenly a change

comes over me, and I am possessed by the spirit of restlessness. Tim's grave must look so desolate to-day, with its flowers nipped by the frost, and parched and perished by the wind. I cannot resist the impulse that is on me to go to it, and put my hand upon it, and (if there is communion between the spirits of the dead and the living) make her sweet soul understand how my guilty one pines for, and loves, and longs to rejoin hers.

There is a footpath through the grounds to the village churchyard, and I take it without delay. It leads through the wilderness where Tim slept with her head on my lap on that bright summer day, long ago, when we first saw Theo, and past the meadows by the otter-pool. The end of it twists about the Polands' garden, and as I am running by the house a tap at the drawing-room window arrests me, and I look through the glass at Mrs. Poland's face, whereon tears and smiles are fighting for supremacy.

"I will come in on my way back," I scream, for a biting blast is sweeping by me, and my voice will be carried away if I do not elevate it greatly; and for answer she opens the window, and drags me in.

"Is the child mad to be out in such weather?" she says. "Wait patiently; wait here."

"What for?" I ask wonderingly; and she looks at me in amazement, and asks—

"Where are you going?"

"To Tim!" I reply.

"What for?" she asks now, and I feel that my answer will seem a vague one to her when I say—

"For comfort."

"Wait here," she repeats; "wait here till I know what I ought to do. You shouldn't be out; it shouldn't be there——"

"Why shouldn't I be out, and what shouldn't be there?" I say, getting myself away to the door as I speak.

"My dear Claire, I have a visitor," she pants out; but I rush on, for I see she

wants to detain me, and I will not be detained.

It is but a step to the wicket-gate of the churchyard, and my eager feet carry me quickly from thence to the corner under the cypress where Tim is lying. Some one is standing here before me! As he lifts his bowed head from the top of the white marble cross to which he has been clinging, I see that it is Theo.

So once again Tim and Theo and I are together, and we have this comfort given to us in the midst of our misery, that she is happy and at rest.

CLAIRE VINCENT.

My wife Claire refuses to write another line, therefore I am compelled to finish the story our sister, friend, favourite Tim began. Tim had her faults, and, to be perfectly candid, her worst fault was a mistake—she loved me! Other women have done the same thing, and seen the folly of it and got over it. But Tim was better both in mind

and soul than these others, and so, though she saw the folly (that is, the futility) of it, she never got over it—but died.

It is a great pity, because Tim was just the sort of girl to have brought me to her feet, and made me the responsive, self-sacrificial, slave-like friend she wished me to be, if she had only been patient enough to have lived a little longer. She always thought of me before she thought of herself, and still she loved to seem to sway me. In short, she was a mixture of queen and child, and the mixture is a potent one to a man.

But in all honesty, I must confess that I should never have loved Tim as I love Claire, my wife. Claire has superb beauty, and a magnificent manner ; but her beauty and her magnificence never appeal to me so strongly as when she forgets them utterly, and bows her head into my bosom in a spasm of bitter recollection of Tim. When she does that, I love her almost as much for her resemblance to the darling who always made me her first consideration

as I do for her charming self. This crowning one is added to my other debts to Tim—her example has made Claire far less selfish than she was when I knew her first; and a fellow does appreciate unselfishness in a woman, especially when it is exhibited for himself.

That day when Claire and I met at Tim's grave was [three months from the date of Mrs. Macpherson's death. The good old soul died of a cold she caught while superintending the scouring out of the Hut, in order to free it from every taint of the strangers who had inhabited it for a while. She was not ill long, and she did not suffer much, and I was remarkably attentive to her the whole time. So her end was peace, and she left me the whole of her property unconditionally.

Claire and I spend most of our time at Cairnholme. I dislike the Ravensbourne district on account of associations that are painful when recalled, and that I see no possible use in recalling. Mrs. Vincent is

quite as charming as Lady Torrens was, but I can never quite forget that she snubbed me once.

Aunt Helen and I are not such good friends as we used to be. She falsified facts about my birth to Tim, and accused my father of crime and my mother of shame, in order to carry out her own aim and separate me from the Vincents. It was done of her ambitious love for me, but I can never quite forgive her. We ignore the subject, but are not comfortable together.

Our first child is a week old; it's a boy, and we are going to christen him Tim Vincent. May he, like Tim, "love through life and death with perfect faith," and be "true to one for ever!"

THE END.







